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VISIONS AND REVELATIONS

"What if Earth
Be but the shadow of Heaven, and things therein
Each to other like more than on Earth is thought!"

MILTON.

VISIONS AND REVELATIONS

DISCOURSES ON THE APOCALYPSE

BY

REV. J. T. DEAN, M.A.
COLDINGHAM

"The City of God remaineth." LUTHER.

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PREFACE

FEW books of the New Testament have so appealed to the imagination and heart of the Church as the "Revelation of St. John." In every age the Apocalypse has had its careful students, who have sought to interpret its imagery and explain its message. These writers have, for the most part, been anxious, chiefly, to shew the application of the Book to the circumstances of their own time; and it is not to be denied that the results of their ingenious toil have been often fantastic enough. Yet they have not erred in believing that the Visions of Patmos have a new significance for every age. Their mistake has been their failure, sometimes, to recognise that the pictures and sayings of the Apocalypse had an immediate contemporary meaning, and were directly addressed to men and women who had to live the Christian life under the conditions that prevailed in the Roman Province of Asia at the close of the first century of our era.

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The modern historical method, which has been applied with such illuminating effect to the New Testament as a whole, has given new life and reality for us to the "Book of Revelation." Many scholars, of whom the chief is Professor Ramsay of Aberdeen, have by their researches enabled us to see what the state of things actually was in Roman Asia, as it was known to the author of the Apocalypse. The fruits of this fresh knowledge have been a number of able commentaries on this Book. Among these I have found none more helpful than the treatise contributed by Professor Anderson Scott to the Century Bible. His essay is small in size but rich in scholarship. Future students will have the help of the masterly discussion in the Expositor's Greek Testament by Dr. Moffatt; but this advantage has been denied to me, since Dr. Moffatt's work was not published until after my manuscript had left my hands. Of the older books on the subject I have not found any so helpful as the Lectures of Frederick Denison Maurice—that great spiritual master, that high interpreter of dreams.

The aim of the present work, to present a popular exposition of the Apocalypse, has determined the exclusion of any explicit treatment of many topics, such as the Authorship,

Apocalyptic, the Sources of the Imagery—questions which, important and interesting as they are, do not seem to me to be vital to a helpful understanding of the Book. I believe that a work confining itself strictly to exposition may not be without its place and use.

I would take this opportunity of thanking my friends, the Rev. W. H. Macfarlane of Keith, Professor Cairns, and the Rev. John Morrison, B.D., of Edinkillie, who read the lectures in manuscript, and aided me with encouragement and valuable suggestions.

Especially would I express my deep sense of obligation to my friend, the Rev. J. H. Leckie of Cupar, whose sympathetic criticism of the manuscript and careful revision of the proofs have freed the work from many defects in thought and expression.

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VISIONS AND REVELATIONS

I

THE SPIRITUAL POINT OF VIEW

"I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day."—REV. i. 10.

THE Book of Revelation is one of the most profoundly Christian books in the New Testament. It contains, as the prologue tells us, "the Revelation of Jesus Christ," that is, the Revelation proceeding from Jesus Christ, "which God gave Him to shew unto His servants, even the things which must shortly come to pass." It deals with the spiritual and eternal forces and personalities that operate unseen, behind the events and movements and agents that are visible on the field of history. It was written to meet a definite situation, and to give help to Christians in a particular crisis; yet, because its teaching rests on moral and spiritual truths that are

more unvarying than the laws of Nature itself, it has a word of guidance and encouragement for every age, and not least for times like our own, when the Church has to fight for its very life against forces that seem well-nigh overwhelming. The method of the Book of Revelation will always be the true method; for in every time of doubt it is well to fall back on first principles, upon indubitable and eternal truths. Therefore is this Book one of the most modern of the books of the New Testament.

And yet how little of it does the average Christian know! He is familiar with the first few chapters with their particular messages to the Seven Churches, and the last two chapters that set forth in stately imagery the glory of the City of God and the blessedness of its inhabitants, and a few isolated passages and texts throughout the Book that gleam like diamonds in a bed of gravel. But of the teaching of the Book as a whole, of the argument that runs through it, of the message that it has for the Church and the world, and in which its power to sustain lies, he knows comparatively little. Many even of the richest Christian minds have laid it aside in bewilderment and despair of being able to make anything of it. It was long before it

obtained general acceptance by the Church. And, though the instinct of the Church for "the religious faith and feeling" in it ultimately secured for it its place, only now are we coming to see its true meaning and value.

The Church was not altogether to blame for its failure to appreciate the Book at its true worth. It is a Book difficult to understand. Its form was perhaps too Jewish to find favour with the Gentile Church. While much of its imagery is derived from the Old Testament and other Jewish books, much of it was purely local and circumstantial; and with the obscuring of the history of the Province of Asia, the key to the imagery was lost, perhaps irrecoverably lost. (As, however, that history is being recovered and pieced together by the patient labour of antiquaries, this Book is sharing in the new light that is being thrown on everything connected with the Early Church.) But while much is still obscure, and may always remain obscure, the general purpose and meaning of the Book are so clear, its message is so permanent, its teaching so healthy and bracing, its line of argument so suited to our time, that to neglect to make all of it that can be made is to deprive the Christian life of a strength and hope that come from seeing, beneath the

advancing and receding wave of surface movement, the steady, irresistible flow of the tide of the Divine purpose.

A careful reader of the Book cannot fail to be impressed with its value in helping to understand the movement of events at the present time, and in encouraging to patience and endurance and optimism in Christian profession. It is not necessary to be able to clear up all its obscurities, or to have the key to every incident and symbol, but merely to catch a glimpse of the great outlines of its teaching, and give its fundamental truths their true place in our minds, in order to be saved from discouragement at the Church's present position, and the weakness and paralysis to which that discouragement gives rise.

The first chapter tells us something about the circumstances in which the Book was written. It was to a receptive mind that the Revelation came. "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day," says the writer. This introductory lecture may be called "The Spiritual Point of View."

Now, our attention is arrested at the very outset by what I take to be the dominant note of the Book, the note of optimism, of assured triumph, of exuberant praise. There are no parts of this great oratorio written

in the minor mode. Everywhere it speaks of victory. The risen Saviour goes forth, conquering and to conquer, and His suffering Church conquers with Him. This note is struck at the very beginning. Scarcely has the writer finished the formal opening when he bursts into a song of praise and victory to Christ. "Unto Him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by His blood; and He made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen. Behold, He cometh with the clouds; and every eye shall see Him, and they which pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth shall mourn over Him. Even so, Amen." And this hymn of glory is all the more wonderful when we consider the situation of the Church that is called to join in the lofty strain. That situation was to outward seeming desperate. The Church was passing through tribulation and persecution. The power of Rome lay crushing and grinding upon it. It seemed as if life, not to speak of hope and praise and triumph, would be impossible. It may help us to understand the situation better if we think of the position of our Covenanting forefathers during what is known in our own history as "The Killing

Time." The hand of a persecuting Government lay heavy upon them. Its soldiers were scouring the country, searching every den and cave of the earth that might furnish them with a hiding-place, hunting them upon the hills as men hunt deer. Spies and informers were hired to betray them. Few in number, crushed and broken, driven about from place to place, with little opportunity of meeting together and comforting and heartening one another, what fate seemed to lie before them but to yield, or to live on, a hopeless, hunted life, till death took them from a world that was not worthy of them? What was open to them save to hang their harps on the willows, and to mourn for the hurt of the daughter of their people? Not so, says this writer, but to take down their harps, and strike a full, joyous strain of praise to the Redeemer, who was bringing them through the fiery trial, and leading them along the same royal road of suffering as He Himself trod; who was making them a kingdom to God and priests to His Father; who would come at the end of the ages riding upon the clouds, and be revealed as King to every eye, and strike His enemies dumb with terror, and give His faithful followers the victory.

And he who saw the vision, and sent this

stirring message, was not himself exempt from a share in the hard lot of his fellow-Christians. He was one with them in all they were enduring. He calls himself their brother and partaker with them in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus. He was, or had been, in exile for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, condemned as an outstanding Christian—so Professor Ramsay thinks—to hard labour in the mines and quarries of Patmos. His lot had been harder even than theirs. If they were like the Covenanters hunted on the hills and moors, he was like one of the saints languishing in the prison-house on the Bass. Yes, Jesus Christ had brought nothing to him outwardly but dishonour and suffering. That was all that life had to shew. But behind the veil of sense, in the region of the soul, peace and joy and assurance of victory reigned. He was like an officer who, in the darkest hour of disaster, never doubts the ultimate triumph of the cause for which he stands, because he believes in the General.

Thus it stood with the Church and with John. How does it stand with us? Are we possessed of the same high hopes, the same buoyant confidence in Christ? Or is it not rather the case that, though almighty

truth is with us and the power that overcometh the world, though the ages of Christendom are behind us with their cheering lessons, and we have the promise that the Spirit of Christ will always be with us, we are ready to give up all for lost if an enemy but appear on the horizon? Not in that spirit have the victories of faith been won, but in the confidence that

> "Crowns and thrones may perish,
> Kingdoms rise and wane,
> But the Church of Jesus
> Constant will remain."

This, then, is the dominant note of the Book—hope, confidence, assurance of victory. How was it that John was able to attain to this enthusiastic faith of his amid circumstances so depressing? By what secret have men at all times been able to preserve their Christian confidence strong and secure against the inrush of the world? How shall we be able to hold by the belief that, notwithstanding all appearances to the contrary, the Spirit of Jesus will one day pervade the whole of human life, and subdue it unto Himself? In our text lies the great secret. It is in holding the spiritual point of view. "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day."

What the precise experience that came to

John on that Sabbath morning was, it seems useless to enquire. It is not likely that he was enjoying a Sabbath rest from toil. I like to think of him rather as engaged in his hard work, yet meditating all the while on spiritual truth, and becoming so absorbed in his meditation that work became mechanically done, while his spirit was soaring on the wings of contemplation in the high regions of heaven. Devout meditation enabled him to press through the sense-barrier that ordinarily shut him in like his fellows, so that he wandered amid spiritual mysteries, like him who has broken through a fence into a lovely garden, and has met one who condescendingly guides him through it, and shews him its wonders and beauties. In this spiritual region, amid things unseen, his faith gained its strength. By what he saw there he was enabled to send his stirring message of encouragement to his tried fellow-Christians.

The vision that John saw, and which so wrought upon his faith, resolves itself into two parts, the Divine Worker, and the Divine work. These we shall consider in turn.

I. *The Divine Worker.*—It was a vision of Christ that strengthened John's faith. When the veil that hung between the seen and the unseen was lifted, the seer saw seven

golden candlesticks, and in the midst of the candlesticks, one like unto a son of man. By means of various symbols he suggests the character and majesty of this Divine presence. He bears the semblance of human nature, but human nature through which shines a Divinity that illumines and glorifies the humanity. His kingly and priestly functions are symbolised by the garment that He wears, and the girdle that girds His breast round about. He is the "Ancient of Days," whose head and whose hair are white as white wool, white as snow, and there is but a step of thought from this conception to "the Word that was in the beginning with God." His eyes are as a flame of fire, "looking into the heart and spirit, discovering whatever is false, and burning it with their love." His feet are like unto burnished brass, as if it had been refined in a furnace, denoting at once "unwearied endurance and resistless strength." His voice is loud above the roar of the Ægean. His word is like a sharp two-edged sword, piercing to the truth. His countenance is as the sun shineth in his strength. In this description there are suggestions of the Jesus who had walked the world's road, but it is Jesus glorified and raised to Divine conditions. "And when I saw Him, I fell

at His feet as one dead. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, Fear not; I am the first and the last, and the Living one,"—from whom all things proceed, towards whom they flow, the possessor of life in Myself; "and I was dead,"—I passed through all the experiences of mortal life, even the bitterest of them; "and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades,"—My experience has been such that I am able to guide every one safely through all the conditions into which he can ever be brought. By such expressions, John tries, as far as he can by symbol, to give his readers an idea of the power and majesty and sympathy of the glorified Jesus. And it is this Jesus that is behind all things that happen. He is the Worker in the spiritual world. And if that is so, can there be any doubt whether it is the Church or the persecutor that will go down in the struggle? Over and over again in the world's history has the weakness of the few proved stronger than the might of the many. Could Israel hope to stand before the chariots of Sisera, which mowed them down as the reaper lays low the standing corn? But with them were unseen allies; the stars in their courses were fighting against Sisera. "Alas, my master!

how shall we do?" said Elisha's servant, when he saw Dothan surrounded by the soldiers of the Syrian king to take the prophet. "And Elisha answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha." "At my first defence," writes Paul to Timothy, "no one took my part, but all forsook me. But the Lord stood by me, and strengthened me; and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion." "One with God" has always proved a majority. Athanasius against the world, Luther the solitary monk before the Diet of Worms, many a lonely thinker and preacher lifting up his voice amid the world's voices that sought to drown it—these seem powerless to accomplish anything. But the unseen Helper is ever near. The Divine Presence walks amid the candlesticks. Christ is with those who witness for truth and right. "And I saw in my dream, that the Interpreter took Christian by the hand, and led him into a place where was a fire burning against a wall, and one standing by it, always casting

much water upon it to quench it; yet did the fire burn higher and hotter. Then said Christian, 'What means this?' So he had him about to the other side of the wall, where he saw a man with a vessel of oil in his hand, of the which he did also continually cast (but secretly) into the fire." And could we but get a glimpse of the other side of the wall, or, to use the words of the text, were we "in the Spirit," we should see the Saviour walking amid the candlesticks; and, seeing Him, we should never doubt the triumph of His Church.

II. *The Divine Work.*—"I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the candlesticks one like unto a son of man. . . . And the seven candlesticks are seven churches." Those little congregations that the seer was instructed to write his message to, and all Christian congregations, are candlesticks, each holding up a point of light in the surrounding darkness, so feeble that it seems as if the darkness must swallow it up. A candle burning in the night is a little thing. Seven candles were insufficient to light all the Province of Asia. But what if ever and anon a new candle comes into view? What if candle after candle is lighted by Christ, till over the whole earth innumerable dots

of light annihilate the darkness, and illumine the world with the brilliancy of a city street? And faith shews us the Son of Man walking in the midst of the candlesticks, lighting, trimming, every little flicker making the darkness less dark, and becoming a source from which other candles may catch flame.

There is one detail in the description of the Saviour which has not yet been touched upon. "He had in His right hand seven stars," "a chain of glittering jewels" hanging from His hand. And "the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches." What is meant by the angels of the churches? It is held by many that the angels of the churches are their spiritual counterparts, what they ideally are in the eye of Christ, what they might actually be did they reflect His light as they ought, what they are ever approaching to as they become what He can make them. This is a very suggestive idea. The murky, feeble, sputtering candle should be, and may become a star. Beside the actual church, there is the church as it is in the hand of Christ, the angel of the church, the ideal of the church, filled full of divine, far-reaching influence, as a star is freighted with light. There is not a congregation, even the humblest, that may

not send its influence to the ends of the earth, as a star sends its light to distant worlds.

Such is the work that is being carried on behind the veil of sense. Christ is lighting candles amid the darkness, and nurturing glimmering candles till they become stars. The Master is behind all, giving to all faithful churches and to all faithful lives the power to radiate more light, till they become stars in the firmament, piercing the night with their glittering shafts. If we could only be in the Spirit sometimes, as John was! If we could only penetrate the veil by faith! We can if we will. "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day." It is the day that saw Him rise from the grave, victorious over death. More than any other day, it is associated with the triumphs of His Cross, and has the promise of blessing. If we only made the most of it, and entered into the contemplation of its holy and uplifting associations, the curtain of sense would be drawn aside for us, and we should see the Saviour in all His Divine majesty and in all His human sympathy, walking in the midst of His Church; and all doubt would vanish; and our glad hearts would break into hymns of praise unto Him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by His blood.

II

"TO HIM THAT OVERCOMETH"

"To him that overcometh."—REV. ii. 7, 11, 17, etc.

SOME one has flung the sneer at Christianity that heaven is a place for those who have failed on earth. The aphorism contains just the amount of superficial truth that many similar aphorisms contain, but it serves to suggest one or two useful thoughts. The first is that *what earth counts failures may, when looked at from a higher point of view, be seen to be the truest successes.* If through the struggle with adverse circumstances, against which a man seems to make no headway, the soul is being disciplined to greater trust in God, then, however much of a failure life may seem to be, it is producing for that man the best that it can produce. Outward success can never be the final test in a world whose most subduing influence has gone forth from the Cross. A man's position in the world may have all the marks of apparent success, and yet his

life may be a tragic failure. He may have bartered all the things that last for those that perish with the using. While, on the other hand, a man may have failed as the world counts failure, and yet he may have laid up for himself treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not corrupt, and where thieves do not break through and steal. Character may have been disciplined and perfected in the struggle.

But further, *the aphorism could be uttered only in defiance of the whole teaching of the Bible*. How could any honest thinker give utterance to it in face of the earnest exhortations of Scripture to diligence in whatsoever the hands find to do, its constant urging to effort, its insistence on life as a warfare, a race, a wrestling, a trading, a watching? The aphorism is radically false. Heaven is not the place for failures, but for those who have fought a good fight, and finished their course, and kept the faith. For such is the crown of righteousness laid up. It is the place where the real victors in life's battle shall reap the fruits of their victory.

These thoughts are amply borne out by the letters that John was instructed to write to the Seven Churches. The fulcrum on which his exhortations rest is that the worthy shall receive a reward: "To him that over-

cometh." We saw in the last lecture how the dominant note of the Book is confidence in coming victory. But coming victory implies faithfulness in present warfare. The victory is not yet, but it is coming. And the writer uses that inspiring hope to stimulate the persecuted saints to faithfulness in their Christian life. "To him that overcometh."

It is the ideal Church that shall have complete victory. But "the Church in the field of history," the Church as represented by Christian communities and congregations, is carrying on warfare with a world that is at enmity with God. And these letters are written to bring to the struggling congregations of Asia encouragement, warning, stimulus.

And the first thing that we say, because, however commonplace it may seem, we think it needs to be said, is, that *these churches were actual congregations, each with its own history and situation and characteristics.* The Book of Revelation has not had justice done to it, just because this fact has to a large extent been overlooked. But within the last few years Professor Ramsay has brought his unrivalled knowledge of the history and antiquities of the Province of Asia to the unveiling of the meaning of these two chapters,

and much that was obscure is now plain. He has shewn that the writer was intimately acquainted with the history and traditions of the cities in which the churches were, that he knew their political situation, their social circumstances, and their local sentiments. He has shewn how the general character of the city had entered into the life of the church and given it its colour. Ephesus, for example, was a city that had undergone constant change of situation; and the character of the church exhibited something of the fickleness that constant change is apt to produce. Smyrna had been faithful to its alliance with the Romans for centuries, not only in bright days but in dark; and the church exhibited the same faithfulness to its Divine Master as the city had done to its human ally. Pergamum was the seat of royal authority, and the chief centre of the worship of the Roman Emperor; consequently, the pressure of persecution was most severe there, and the church was under the temptation to seek relief from the severity by making some compromise with the world. Thyatira was weak in natural situation; and the church was possessed of only a little strength. Sardis had once been a great city, secure upon a rocky hill, but its security had been its undoing. Time after time it had been

taken, because the defenders had neglected some side that they deemed impregnable, and its enemies had come as a thief. It was a city over which death was creeping. And the story of the church would be a repetition of the history of the city, because the same faults were in her midst. Philadelphia's situation gave her a unique opportunity of being a centre from which Greek thought and civilisation should radiate forth over Central Asia; and the church was the missionary church, pushing in at the open door, seizing her unparalleled opportunity of spreading the knowledge of Jesus. And Laodicea was the wealthy, luxurious, prosperous city, the centre of finance and commerce and learning, that was everything to all men, the city of compromise. And the church was infected with the same fatal spirit. It was neither cold nor hot. It was like the angels that were "neither rebels nor true to God." It lacked character. Professor Ramsay has brought out in great wealth of detail how these letters are full of allusions to local incidents and sentiments, and it is only our ignorance of Roman Asia and its history that leaves many things still obscure.

But while these churches are actual congregations, they are together representative of

the universal Church. If any proof of this statement is needed, we have it in the use of the number "seven," which, especially in the Book of Revelation, has a symbolic meaning. It was the number that denoted completeness and universality. We can have no doubt that in the eyes of John the Seven Churches stood for all the churches in Asia, and in the whole world, and of all time. Therefore the needs of no group of churches, nor those of all the churches of any one age, exhaust the significance of his messages. In so far as causes, similar to those that were found in the life of the churches of Asia, are at work in the life of any congregation, so far will the same effects follow, and so far does it stand in need of the same helpful encouragement and the same solemn warnings. The history, circumstances, and temptations of every congregation constitute its struggle, and it is in this struggle that it has to overcome.

These letters, as we have said, were written to stimulate the churches to more strenuous effort, by warning where warning was needed, by rebuking where rebuke was called for, by commendation where commendation was admissible. And they are very skilfully constructed to serve this purpose. Use is made of every argument that is likely to influence

the spirit of the churches. We shall look at some of the elements in the total force of persuasion that was brought to bear upon them.

I. *There is a searching estimate of their present condition.* The first step towards a cure is to diagnose the disease. Now, the more we study these churches under the guidance of John, the more we are struck with the fact that each has a character of its own. But we can group them into three groups. To two of them does the Lord give unqualified commendation. Not a word is spoken in dispraise of the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia. And yet they are not the churches that would naturally be singled out for praise by men. It was all that Smyrna could do to keep its head above water. "I know thy tribulation, and thy poverty (but thou art rich), and the reviling" of thine enemies. Smyrna was what we call a struggling church. It is the representative of all struggling congregations, of all despised, persecuted communities of Christians, of all country congregations that find it increasingly hard to make ends meet, that are face to face with decreasing population, that have a hard struggle, but which find life through the struggle. The world does not see much to

be desired in them; but the Lord sees in them wealth and life. And side by side with Smyrna, He places Philadelphia. It had not the struggle of Smyrna. The feature of its situation was opportunity, and it was faithful to its opportunity. It strove to make the name of Jesus known throughout all Central Asia. It was the missionary church. Such was the character of these two churches. In different spheres both were faithful. And as at some Sabbath service they heard the message read, how the Lord Himself noted their struggle and commended their faithfulness, would they not be moved to tears of humble gladness, and would not their hearts be strengthened for even still greater faithfulness?

And at the other end of the scale there are two churches that receive no commendation. Yet they are the very ones that men would praise. Sardis had a good reputation for life; but to the eye of the Searcher of hearts it was dead. Life had gone out of the trunk, and only from the root was a living shoot springing. There were a few names in Sardis that had not defiled their garments. Probably Sardis was not a wealthy church. A church does not need to be wealthy to be dead. But Laodicea was a wealthy church. It was self-

satisfied and envied. But its members had not interest enough in Christ to make its life living. They had reached their position of comfort and luxury at the expense of character. They had made many compromises with the world. They had lived its life. They had lost any enthusiasm they had ever had. And they were rejected with abhorrence.

And to the other three churches the Lord gives mingled praise and blame, sometimes the one, sometimes the other, predominating. Pergamum was a church that had peculiar difficulties owing to its situation in the chief centre of Emperor-worship. It dwelt where Satan's throne was. It was therefore under the constant temptation to purchase a little relief with a little compromise. It was in danger of falling into practical heresies. So there are congregations still whose life is made difficult through local circumstances, which are situated amid surroundings that lay their members specially open to intemperance, to uncleanness, to forms of evil that are fostered by the predominant occupation of the district. Thyatira was a weak church, but it was stronger than it had been. There was development in the right direction. Its last works were more than the first. While Ephesus shewed the opposite tendency. No

one would have said that Ephesus was a decaying church. It had had a great past, and it seemed to be faithful to truth in the present. And yet, to the eye of Christ, its life was like that of a planet gradually cooling, going towards extinction, unless there came some set-back to the downward progress. Outwardly, Ephesus seemed as prosperous as ever it had been. Apparently, it had the same zeal for truth and the same hatred of falsehood. But its enthusiasm had waned. It had left its first love. So there may be congregations still that have had a great past, and whose present may seem not unworthy of their past, which yet may be affected with a chill at the heart, a decay of enthusiasm, a gradual decrease of earnestness, imperceptible from day to day or from year to year, but clearly visible in the changes that take place in the course of a generation. And what is there for such a church but the gradual extinction of light, and removal from its place like a lamp that has gone out? How powerfully must those clear-cut portraits of themselves have stimulated the churches to repentance and new endeavour!

II. Another element in the force of persuasion that these letters exert lies in the appeal that is contained in *the description of the*

Lord who sends the messages. Each of them brings to the mind of the church addressed some aspect of the character and person of the risen Saviour. For the most part, these aspects are to be found in the description of Him that is given in the first chapter, and the special aspect selected to introduce each letter seems closely fitted to the situation and needs of the church to which it is sent. Though this is not clearly apparent in all the letters, in some of them it is so marked that we are warranted in inferring it with regard to the others. It is probably only our ignorance of the situation that renders the fitness obscure. We may illustrate this by the case of Smyrna. The situation of this church is clear. It is passing through tribulation. It is poor and reviled. It has the prospect of savage persecution. What can there be for it but extinction? But the letter is sent to it in the name of Him "which was dead and lived." Professor Ramsay points out how the Authorised Version obscures the meaning of this phrase by translating it "and is alive"; while the Revised Version misinterprets it by inserting the word "again," as if it referred to the resurrection of Jesus. The phrase has a richer meaning than either of these translations brings out. It means that life was brought to

fulness and fruition through death. The death on the Cross was the secret of the life. So was it with this church. To all appearance it was near extinction. But its sufferings and sacrifices were really the very nourishment of its life. Its condition was an illustration of the law of the Cross, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." And we can imagine how encouraging it would be to those hard-pressed Christians of Smyrna to be addressed by their Lord as by One who Himself lived through death, and to be told that He was leading them along the same road by which He Himself had gone. Or to take the letter to the church in Pergamum, the city of authority, where the power of Rome pressed hardest upon the church. Would not the surest way of encouraging them be to remind them that Christ wielded an authority in comparison with which the power of Rome was weakness itself? "These things saith He that hath the sharp two-edged sword," the symbol of authority. He for whose Name they were suffering had all power in heaven and on earth. And when He sends a message to Laodicea as from "the Amen, the faithful and true witness," is it not as if, by mentioning the

virtues in which Laodicea was so lacking, He would shame them out of their life of compromise and lukewarmness? What would bring Laodicea to repentance, what would rouse her to that wholesome shame which is the first step towards reformation, like being reminded of the faithfulness of Jesus, and of the beauty and divineness of a life of steadfastness to principle and to God, of which the Laodicean life was a denial? And so is it still. What can stimulate a congregation that is in danger of languishing, or put fresh warmth into a congregation that has grown cold, or help a congregation to face its difficulties and temptations with courage, like the assurance that, in the person and life of Jesus, there is something that answers its condition and meets its needs?

III. But there is still a third element entering into the spiritual force of these letters, *the promise that is made to those that overcome.* "To him that overcometh will I give." And again there is a singular fitness between the nature of the struggle and the promised reward. Smyrna had been faithful. Through suffering and sacrifice she had been achieving life for herself, and the promise is that she will obtain the crown of life. Thyatira was the weak church, and to her is promised

power and dominion. The church that is growing in the right direction is achieving for herself spiritual influence and lordship; for, of course, that is the only kind of power that is worth having. The weak church that is developing into new strength shall receive the morning star, the promise of influence that grows larger and ever larger. And the faithful few in Sardis shall have their appropriate reward also. While life is receding from the church as a whole, their names shall not be blotted out of the Book of Life.

Have we not here a thought to stimulate every church and every individual to earnestness, that our work is determining our reward? We are fixing now the main lines of our life in the future world. The promised rewards are appropriate to the life here. This is the truth that Jesus sets forth in parable after parable. According to his faithfulness in this life, shall be the demand made upon each man in the life to come. He who has been faithful shall be called to the rich reward of greater responsibility, heavier burdens, more exalted service. How could it be otherwise? We are shaping our destiny here and now. We are determining here and now for what trusts we shall be fit, for what tasks we shall be equipped, on what plane of heavenly life we

can live. Ought not this thought to weigh with us?

Perhaps the question of most interest to us is, To which of these Asian congregations does our own most nearly correspond in character and outlook? I fear we cannot lay claim to the high place of Smyrna, with its unwavering faithfulness in the midst of suffering and poverty; nor of Philadelphia, with its missionary zeal and readiness to enter in at every open door. God forbid that our position should be that of Sardis, with a name to live, while death is creeping over the heart; or of Laodicea, with its lukewarmness in the things of the soul. It cannot be Pergamum, for there is nothing in our situation that forms a peculiar hindrance to Christian living. Then there are but two others, Ephesus and Thyatira. Let it not be Ephesus, with its splendid past and its prosperous present, but with its future growing chillier and chillier, and dimmer and dimmer, till love is cold, and light is quenched. Rather may it be Thyatira, with its present weakness and its promise of future power. For is there anything that we should desire more than that we should have spiritual influence, helping to break down every form of ignorance and oppression? Let it be Thyatira, then, O Lord. Look

through us with those eyes that are like a flame of fire, consuming all in us that is hateful in Thy sight. Come to us with the flaming feet of service. Give us the morning star, glimmering herald of an ampler day. And to Thee, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, shall be the glory, in the Church, and throughout all ages. Amen.

III

THE THRONE OF GOD

"Straightway I was in the Spirit: and behold, there was a throne set in heaven, and One sitting upon the throne."—REV. iv. 2.

IN the second and third chapters the writer sends messages to the individual churches, messages of warning and encouragement and praise and exhortation, according to the condition of each. Now in the fourth chapter he enters upon his main argument, which is applicable to the condition of the whole Church of the time, and which is also applicable to the condition of the Church in every age.

Now, in studying a book so full of movement and varied imagery, there is danger that we lose sight of the unity in the details, that we fail to see the wood for the trees. We may examine each individual part without getting a grip of the whole. Before entering upon the exposition of the fourth chapter, then, it may be helpful to give an outline of the argument of the whole Book, that we may

carry it along with us as the scheme into which every detail has to be fitted.

The situation that called forth the Book of Revelation is written plain on every page of it. The Christian religion had been working for many years beneath the surface of society. It had been undermining the old pagan life. But now the Empire had awakened to the fact that this religion that had been overlooked and despised was dangerous to the established order of things. Especially was this seen in the fact that Christians refused to offer to the Emperor the worship that was regarded as the mark of loyalty and good citizenship. And therefore in the reign of Domitian, the time to which ancient tradition assigns the book, Christianity was being persecuted more as a political crime than as a religious movement. At particular points the battle between the Church and the Empire had already begun, and soon the conflict would be all along the line. The Empire was able to bring the whole force of worldly power to crush the feeble Church. And what future was before the Church save to be crushed? How could the little Christian communities withstand the power that no nation had been able to resist? Could the Church expect to go through the fiery trial

unconsumed? Was it the Church or the Empire that was to go down in the struggle? Questions such as these must have troubled the hearts of many who had come to love Christ. And the Book of Revelation is John's answer to them, the answer of Christ given through him. The curtain of the unseen is uplifted. The personalities and forces of the spiritual world are revealed. As in a series of tableaux, the warfare between God and Satan is depicted. The powers of the world and of the infernal world are shewn to go down before the power of God and of the Lamb. The Holy City descends out of heaven from God. And all who are faithful and who endure to the end share in the victory of the City of God. In the revelation that behind the things that are seen there are unseen realities working out the will of God, does the comforting message of the book lie. God had not handed over the Christians to the rage of their enemies. They were still in His own hands. And even through their sufferings and fiery trial He was bringing to pass the redemption of the world.

Such was the way in which John met the need of the Church. How well fitted to the immediate circumstances that method was we

shall be able to recognise if we compare this Book with the Epistle to the Hebrews, which has marked points of resemblance to it. Both were written to churches enduring persecution. Both were intended to exhort and hearten the sufferers to endure. But the points of difference between the books are not less marked than the points of resemblance. The kind of persecution is different in the two cases, and this difference determines the line of argument used in each case. The Epistle to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who were enduring persecution at the hands of their fellow-countrymen, who taunted them with having forsaken a religion that was God-given, that had been ministered by angels, that was gorgeous with solemn ritual, for a religion that was but of yesterday, that had neither visible temple nor altar, and whose Founder had been crucified as a malefactor but a few years before. The Hebrew Christians were enduring a persecution of contempt. And the writer to the Hebrews wards off its stroke by proving, from the Hebrew Scriptures themselves, that the Hebrew religion, august and venerable and Divinely-given as it was, was yet but the type and shadow of the spiritual religion of Jesus that had come to supersede it; that its sacrifices, its temple,

its altar, its priesthood, its solemn feast-days, were but shadows of realities in the heavens, and pointed forward to one great High Priest, one all-sufficient Sacrifice, and one universal Altar. And this was the true way of dealing with their case. For men can look with pity upon those who, from the standpoint of ignorance and blindness, give them scorn. The contempt of those who are still groping in a darkness from which they have escaped need not vex them. It was just the kind of argument that met effectually the persecution that the Hebrews had to bear. But it was another kind of persecution that the churches of Asia were enduring. Imprisonment, banishment, death, were its instruments. Its pressure lay upon the Church like the heavy hand of a giant. And what answer can be given to brute force? It cannot be argued down. Death is death, even though the sufferer is dying for the truth. Only two courses were conceivable, resistance by force and patient endurance. Force must be met with still greater force; or the sufferers must meet it with passive resistance, and overcome it by bearing it, and not succumbing to it. Now, force was out of the question in the case of the Christians of Asia, but patient endurance was open to them. And the aim of the

writer is to give them such a vision of the movements of the unseen world as will nerve them to endure, and by enduring overcome. Visions of the blessedness prepared for the faithful take the place of the hortatory passages in the Hebrews. Thus it is not argument, but uplifting, strengthening vision that we have in the Book of Revelation.

Has the Book no message for our time because it was written to a Church that was enduring persecution? The Church is still face to face with the world that lieth in wickedness. There is still war between them. The evil of the world is indeed no longer embodied in one organisation like the Roman Empire. There is no single institution in which all the hostility of the world to God is brought to a focus. Nevertheless, the battle is going on. It has never ceased. It has never been interrupted. And we are all soldiers in it, fighting on the one side or on the other, for the world or for God. The battlefield is human life. The forces of evil and the forces of righteousness face each other. And often Christians have doubt as to the issue. They are sometimes like to lose heart and give up the struggle. And it is good for us to go back in thought to those dark days, when the whole power and hatred

of the world seemed to be concentrated against the infant Church of Christ. It is good to ponder on the vision that put heart into the Christians of those times, and the inspiring hopes that made them able to endure bravely and to overcome. If we could only see behind the scenes, our hearts would be encouraged as theirs were.

We now come to the consideration of the fourth chapter. "After these things I saw, and behold, a door opened in heaven, and the first voice which I heard, a voice as of a trumpet speaking with me, one saying, Come up hither, and I will shew thee the things which must come to pass hereafter." Hitherto the situation of the individual churches has engaged John's attention. But there is something behind and beneath that. There are depths of which history is but the ripple on the surface. And you cannot know the meaning even of the ripple till you know something of the depths. You cannot measure the things that are happening on earth till you look at them in the light of the spiritual realities that sustain them. You must look at the events of history from the spiritual point of view before you can claim to have really seen them. Here on earth you see the Church at war with the Empire. You

can see no hope for the Church. And you are undoubtedly right if you look merely at the might of the power that each can bring into the field. The power of the Empire is overwhelming. It is like the strength of the steam-hammer against the fragile thing on the anvil. But "Come up hither." Look at the antagonists from a higher point of view. You do not see merely might against might, strong force opposing weak force. You see strong force fighting for unrighteousness opposed to weak force fighting for righteousness. The forces are not on the same plane. The weakest righteousness is stronger than the strongest unrighteousness. When we obey the command, "Come up hither," we see that force, power, authority, are not the strongest things in the world. The blow of the ruffian is less powerful than the child's caress. You build a wall against a sapling to keep it in its place; by and by the forces of life begin to press upon the wall, and year after year it gives more and more, till at length it falls in ruins. We cannot understand it till we obey the command, "Come up hither," and look at the phenomenon, not from the point of view of dead force, but of life. A new and revolutionary thought rises in the mind of some one. He gives it to the world. He sends it afloat.

And immediately the organised forces of intellect are up in arms against it. The Church condemns it. The world-power persecutes it. Society sets its influence against it. But it spreads and spreads, percolates through the minds of men like water through sand; and another generation hails with acclaim what its predecessor had banned. How is it that the power of the world is unable to crush the seedling truth? The forces are not on the same plane. Force can counteract force. But force can no more touch truth than a material sword can pierce an insubstantial ghost. Yet, to appreciate this, you must obey the command, "Come up hither." You must judge from the standpoint of truth, not from the standpoint of force. Or a righteous thought takes hold of the conscience of some one, a thought of which you can not only say, "It is true," but of which you must say, "It is right." He puts it forth to the world. And the rage of society is stirred. The enmity of vested interests is aroused. The whole weight of the world's most powerful forces is employed to crush that budding morality. But the moral truth penetrates into the conscience of society, as the acid in the raindrop eats its way into the granite rock. And the rock that stands unmoved before the

onset of the winter sea crumbles under the gentle finger of the raindrop. Righteousness, that no worldly force could promote, makes its way by persuasion of the conscience. But we cannot understand it till we obey the command, "Come up hither." We must judge from the higher standpoint of righteousness. And so the Church of Christ seemed to be the feeblest of feeble things, a smouldering flax that a hand might crush. And the strong hand of the world grasped it to extinguish it. But it lived, and grew, and conquered. We cannot understand it till we obey the command, "Come up hither." The vision of the reality and strength of spiritual things alone can give us understanding of the wonders that are happening every day in this world of ours. "Come up hither." Look at them from the higher point of view, and you will understand.

But what was it that John saw that so affected his estimate of the things of earth? "Straightway I was in the Spirit: and behold, there was a throne set in heaven, and One sitting upon the throne." The sovereign power of the world was not on earth, but in heaven. This thought is the nerve of the whole chapter and, we may say, of the whole Book; for the rest of the Book is but the

unfolding of this verse. All the revelation of the Book is true because this is true: "There was a throne set in heaven, and One sitting upon the throne." The centre of the universe, the foundation of its order and life, is God. I ask you who have earnestly pondered the things of life, who have passed through doubts and perplexities, and have come out into the firm standing-ground of the Christian faith, what it was that brought you through. Was it not, in some form or other, the thought of God? Do we not derive confidence and hope from the faith that the destiny of the world is not in the hands of a man, even the greatest and the best, much less in the hands of a Nero or a Domitian? that it is in the hands of Almighty God, its Creator? If we are crossing the sea, we like to think that the captain knows his business, that he is a wise, skilful, courageous man, equal to every emergency. How much more should it hearten us to feel that the ship in which not only *our* concerns are embarked, but which is freighted with all the concerns of the wide universe of space and time, the interests of all the generations that are gone and of all the generations that are to come, is steered by the hand of Almighty wisdom and power and righteousness! Surely we can

trust the world with confidence into the hands of such an One. And it must have been a source of great strength to the persecuted Christians to be reminded that there was a throne above Domitian's.

The thought of God's sovereignty has brought strength to His people in many a crisis in the history of the human race. The changes of life terrify; but faith in God, the unchangeable One, sustains. When the Israelites were going forth from the familiar slavery of Egypt to the strange and awful experiences of freedom, the revelation of the "I Am" was given to them to allay their dread of the unfamiliar. The unchanging God was behind all the changes of this mortal life. In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up. The hand that had so long guided the affairs of the nation was still in death. The good king was gone, and it was to be feared that his policy and his aims were dead with him. The future was dark to one like Isaiah. But in that hour he had his vision of the great God. There was a hand behind the hand of Uzziah and of Ahaz. Uzziah was dead, but God was not dead. Ahaz was incapable, but God was not incapable. So when Ezekiel was by the brook Chebar, astonished and bewildered at all that

God had permitted to come to His chosen people and His chosen dwelling-place he too saw a vision of God, the details of which furnished John with much of the imagery of his conception. The nation seemed to have been swept away. Its candlestick was removed out of its place. But God still was, and all that should be the first interest of a righteous man was safe. So was it with John. The power of the Empire seemed overwhelming. But faith held that there was a supreme King, in whose hand were the hearts of the kings of the earth.

And the fitness of this thought for our own day is not less striking. We are in the midst of perpetual change. And we cannot say as we look out upon the future, "The changes that are sure to come I do not fear to see." We do fear them. We dread the removal of old and familiar landmarks. What a steadying effect, then, should this thought have, that all changes are but surface ripples of the unchanging! God is still sure. Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, to-day, and for ever. Things are being shaken that those things that cannot be shaken may remain. And they who have trusted in the Lord Jesus have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Would that we could always live in

the faith, that, because He is sovereign in heaven and on earth, there is not a single interest, not a single aim, that we, His children, ought to be concerned about, which is not safe. "God's in His heaven—all's right with the world!"

The writer proceeds to try to give his readers by means of symbol a conception of Him that is upon the throne. Symbol was the most natural method for him to employ. The East thinks in pictures. An abstract idea conveys to Orientals little or no meaning, but a picture or a symbol is eloquent. The whole ritual of Israel was symbolic of the God to Whom they were drawing near. Every piece of furniture in the Temple, every action of the priest, had something to suggest about God. Nor were the native inhabitants of those Asian cities unfamiliar with symbolism, as their coins that remain shew. It was quite usual for them to set forth the character of the Divine symbolically. We are ignorant of what many of their symbols were meant to suggest, or at best we grope in the twilight of conjecture. But the Book of Revelation came to a people that would be able clearly to understand its meaning.

In this chapter John sets forth the character of God in three ways.

I. He tells his readers *what He is in Himself.* "He that sat upon the throne was to look upon like a jasper stone and a sardius: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, like an emerald to look upon." The significance of these details is uncertain. The sardius stone was probably the blood-red cornelian, but what stone went by the name of jasper in ancient times is unknown. We cannot be far wrong, however, in supposing that John had in his mind the description of God in the Book of Ezekiel: "And I saw as the colour of amber, as the appearance of fire within it round about, from the appearance of His loins and upward; and from the appearance of His loins and downward I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness round about Him." He is striving to set forth the ineffable glory of God in contrast to what passed for glory in the eyes of men. "It is not a revelation of crushing power, but of perfect untroubled brightness, of light with no darkness at all."[1] "And there was a rainbow round about the throne, like an emerald to look upon." To the minds of those who were familiar with the Old Testament, there would not fail to occur the promise, "I will put My bow in the cloud." God is the faithful Creator. And what should

[1] F. D. Maurice, *The Apocalypse.*

encourage God's servants who were suffering for His Name like the thought that all the pomp and power of the world are as nothing in comparison with the glory that is upon the throne of the universe, and that the favour of man is fickleness itself in comparison with the faithfulness of God?

II. The writer also suggests the sufficiency of God for the needs of men by the thought that *He is surrounded by companions.* He is not alone in His glory. He is not removed from the interests of His creation. The elders are around the throne, clothed in robes of spotless purity, and crowned with crowns of wisdom and righteousness. The representatives of the creation, the living creatures, with their eyes of vigilance and their wings of aspiration and service, are in His presence. All the attributes that men have at any time mistaken for God and worshipped—strength, usefulness, the human powers, and conquering might—are before His face, and contribute to His glory. God is not separated from the beings that He has made. They are in His presence always.

III. He who is upon the throne is described as One who *calls forth the highest exercise of the highest powers of His creatures.* The living creatures adore and confess His holiness,

The elders around the throne cast their crowns before Him and praise Him for the wonders of His creation. This is the highest test of the sufficiency of God for man, that He evokes man's highest powers, worship and adoration. Nothing that is not a worthy object of reverence is Divine enough for us.

Here, then, we have the central fact of John's philosophy of history. It rests on faith in God. The sovereignty of the universe is in the hands of God, all-glorious, all-faithful, caring for all His creatures, taking pleasure in their society, furnishing the supreme and sufficient Object of their worship and adoration. That is the picture that John gives in this fourth chapter. Is there not sufficient guarantee in such an One for the triumph of righteousness? Is there anything still wanting? Yes, something is still wanting. But even this incomplete picture of God must have brought a welcome message to the Christians of Asia. Domitian was not the King of kings. There was a glory more brilliant than the splendour of the purple. There was a voice more awe-inspiring than the voice of Cæsar, the voice of the thunders that issued from the throne. There was a frown more consuming than his, even the lightnings that flashed forth from God. There

was a character more satisfying to the highest conceptions of man, even the holiness that moved the angels and the whole creation to adoration. And that Divine Being was their Friend. He had no terrors for them, for all the terrors inspired by His glory were on their side. What if Domitian were against them? Who was Domitian? He must die. But their God and King was the Lord God, the Almighty, which was, and which is, and which is to come. And if God was for them, need they fear who was against them?

IV

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF LOVE

"And I saw in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, having seven horns, and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent forth into all the earth. And He came, and He taketh *the book* out of the right hand of Him that sat on the throne."—REV. v. 6–7.

IN the fourth chapter the writer has described the power, wisdom, holiness, and faithfulness of God. He has permitted us to listen to the song that the heavenly inhabitants raise to Him for the wonders of His creation. But there were some questions that might well rise to the minds of the Christians. The fact remained that God had not delivered His suffering people from the hand of the oppressor. They were still groaning beneath his yoke, while apparently God was not coming to their help. And of what advantage was it to know that He had power, if it was not put forth for their deliverance? What was His wisdom, if it was unable to devise a way of escape for

them? What meant a holiness that apparently looked with indifference on the sovereignty of a Domitian? Of what value was a faithfulness that left them in the hands of their enemies? The heavens might as well be empty if God remained dumb to their prayer, and gave no sign of sympathy. A God who was indifferent to moral chaos might as well not be at all. And such questions are not confined to the first century. In one form or another they are continually being raised. "But your God does nothing," says Carlyle. How can a world in which Armenian massacres are permitted to happen be a world that is ruled by One who is powerful, wise, holy, and faithful?

To all such questions only history as a whole can furnish the answer. It is easy to isolate some point of the story of the world and condemn it. But looked at from the point of view of progress towards the goal to which the life of man is moving, the supposed blemish may wear another aspect altogether. Belief in God creates difficulties, but it also solves them. The more we are able to see the history of the world in the light of God, the less do these things which at first sight seem defects bulk in our view, and the more are we satisfied that God's method will vindicate itself in the perfected result. To present human

history in the light of God is the aim of this great seer.

The fifth chapter continues the subject of the fourth by setting forth more fully, and with great wealth of symbol, the character of Him in whose hand is the government of the universe.

"I saw in the right hand of Him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the back, close sealed with seven seals." The previous chapter has spoken of God as the Creator. But when He had started creation on its journey, He was not to lose sight of it. He was to be the Guide and Teacher, as He had been the Creator. The destiny of the world, the history of the human race, was within the knowledge of God. That which was a sealed book to all created beings was in His hand.

Now, we are well aware of the difficulties from the intellectual point of view that beset this position. The difficulty of reconciling the fact of freedom, of which we are immediately conscious, with the fact of the Divine foreknowledge, in which we must needs believe, is a real one. But surely the true course for us finite beings is to leave the two facts as they are, with their far ends losing themselves in the unknown to meet in God, but with their

near ends close to our hands to give us help and encouragement. We need the fact of freedom before morality can be possible. Is it not freedom that makes our service of God worthy of His acceptance? We hold by that. We feel the stimulus of it. We say, "This is my duty, therefore I can do it. But because I can refrain from doing it, my service is all the richer in God's sight." But do we not need as much the faith that human history is in the hands of God? that God has not set His creation to drift, no one knows whither, not even Himself? that the unknown future is unknown only to us, but all known to Him, down to the minutest detail? We should not lay stress on the difficulty of bringing these two together, but rather accept the help that comes from them both; the stimulus that we get from feeling that we are dowered with the gift of freedom, and the quiet confidence that comes to us from the faith that all the concerns of the world, and all our concerns, are in the hands of Him that sitteth upon the throne, are in His Book, written, determined, foreknown, provided for. This would, without doubt, comfort the Christians of Asia, as it will help us.

"And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a great voice, Who is worthy to open the

book, and to loose the seals thereof? And no one in the heaven, or on the earth, or under the earth, was able to open the book, or to look thereon. And I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open the book, or to look thereon." There is an irreverent desire to know the future, arising from mere curiosity. It is one that leads men astray into shallow and impossible methods. But there is also a reverent desire, arising from the needs of our moral nature. It is the quest of faith, the longing for the assurance that all will be well with the purposes of God towards mankind. Now, when we get beneath the symbolism of these verses, what have we but the expression of the thought that perhaps God's purpose with man may prove impossible of realisation? that His scheme may be untranslatable into history? There may be no one who has such a knowledge of the mind of God, and such a sympathy with the will of God, as to be able to make it actual. Carlyle tells in his *French Revolution* how the people's deputies sat for weeks framing a Constitution for the new Republic, and when they had finished their work it was so much waste paper. It was good enough, perhaps, for some ideal society, but for the actual France for which it was intended it was an impossible

scheme. There was ever found something thwarting, frustrating, hampering it. "The Constitution would not march." Is it so with the purpose of God? Is He to be foiled in His best intentions? Or is His plan to march? I think that it would be better to believe that there was no God than to think that He was impotent; to fear that He who is on the throne of the universe would find Himself ever foiled and hindered in His holy purposes; to doubt whether He was able to make justice and truth reign on the earth and to put down injustice and falsehood. Do we not feel it to be so? Are not our hope and our happiness bound up with the thought that God will have His way in the world?—that all the powers of evil will be unable to thwart His wise and holy purposes for mankind?

We must look upon this thought as a real doubt that crossed the mind of the writer. But it was only for a moment. One of the elders said unto him, "Weep not: behold, the Lion that is of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath overcome, to open the book and the seven seals thereof." Do not the images of this verse suggest to us strength and might? The lion, the king of beasts! The Root of David, the warlike King of Israel, who established the strength of the

kingdom! Overcome! this suggests might. "No one in heaven or on earth was able." But increase human power; pile strength upon strength; add might to might; multiply power, force, compulsion, terror, till they are almighty, the strength of God Himself, the power of compulsion that God might be able to bring to bear upon man. Meet the strength of Domitian, the strength of evil, with a still greater strength. Bring the king with twenty thousand against him who has but ten thousand. Will not the superior might be able to force the history of mankind towards its goal? Will not such a power of compulsion bring the world perfected to the feet of God? The Lion of the tribe of Judah! Is John thinking how strong the Lion must be to be able to break open the seals that will yield to no other? Then how great must have been his surprise! "I saw in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, having seven horns, and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent forth into all the earth." Not a Being of awful majesty, suggesting the dread power of Omnipotence; but a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with the marks of submission and weakness and death still visible

upon it! Was this the Lion of the tribe of Judah? Was this the embodiment of the strength that was to force open the locked seals, and bring the purpose of God to fulfilment? And yet with all the marks of submission, there mingles the unmistakable suggestion of strength. "Having seven horns," the symbol of perfect power; "and seven eyes," the symbol of perfect intelligence and insight; "which are the seven Spirits of God," the symbol of the Divine activity. It was this sacrificed Lamb, with meekness and submission so manifest, and yet with features so suggestive of strength, who held the key of the locked seals. It was a vision, not of power as the world understands power, but of submission, obedience, defeat, death, and yet through all, of victory; not of strength overcoming through crushing might, through breaking the will that opposes it, but of gentleness, grace, Divine mercy, vindicating itself as the true and abiding power. It was a vision of the strength, not of force, but of love.

This would be a new and comforting revelation to John's readers. Is it not a new revelation to ourselves? Are we, too, not apt to identify power with the kind of might that Domitian possessed, with such force as compels without willingness, as produces

action without intelligence, as brings conformity to rule without love for the law? We seek to ally ourselves with forms of worldly force, thinking that thereby we can affect the destiny of mankind; that we can compel the purpose of God to unfold itself in history; that we can thereby set up the Kingdom of God upon the earth. And we need to be reminded, as we are in this chapter, that the purpose of God cannot be fulfilled by force. For, as soon as men have employed force on its behalf, and have seemed to set up something like it thereby, it ceases to be the purpose of God; for it has violated the God-given freedom of the soul. Not power, crushing and compelling, even were it the power of God Himself, can bring to pass the purpose of God. But the slain Lamb, and all that the Lamb stands for, and all who possess the spirit of the Lamb, are lifting up man from the depths, and bringing to reality all God's gracious purpose concerning him. Force takes a short cut, but God takes the long way about. The knot is not cut, but every entanglement is patiently unloosed, every difficulty is painstakingly surmounted, every wandering step is retraced, every opposing mountain is brought low, every crooked thing is made straight. The purpose of God runs along a

road made level by the bringing low of the hills of human pride, and the filling up of the depths of human shame, and the subduing of the mountains of human opposition. There is no advance till the obstacle is overcome. Every soul is counted worthy of being recognised as a soul. There is no forcible redemption with God. God cannot save an unwilling soul. But the slain Lamb, by His death and sacrifice, melts the stubborn hearts of men, and takes them willing captives. The highest power of the Godhead is manifested in the Lamb that was slain.

And the sacrifice of the Lamb, the strongest power among the eternal things, is no isolated event in the universe. It is the supreme example of a law that runs through all. The law of sacrifice is graven on the creation of God, as far as it can carry it. The solid earth is being continually broken down that it may take shape again. The corn of wheat yields itself to dissolution that it may bear fruit. One generation dies that it may produce another. The fruitful and preservative side of Nature is the self-sacrificing. The world is full of altars, and the smoke of sacrifice is ever rising from them. Life is continued through death. And the history of the world illustrates the same truth. The

power that has done most to make the world less a kingdom of the Evil One, and bring it nearer to being a Kingdom of God, is not the brute force that has so often overrun it like a flood, leaving devastation in its track; not the spirit of those who have carried fire and sword over vast tracts of its surface. It is not those who have urged it forward in its journey towards righteousness, but they who, by persuasion and teaching and patient enlightenment, by endurance of unrighteousness and self-forgetfulness in seeking the welfare of others, by sweet human sympathy reaching out to touch other hearts, have sought to manifest the spirit of Jesus. These are they who make history. Domitian was not making history. But the blood of the martyrs that were slain by him was the seed of a new and diviner world.

> "All through life I see a cross
> Where sons of God yield up their breath;
> There is no life except by death,
> There is no gain except by loss;
> No glory save by taking blame."

And is it not self-sacrifice, the self-sacrifice, not of man, but of God, that is sufficient to meet man's supreme need? How we sometimes long to possess some short and ready method of making men good, of bringing

them to the feet of Christ, of making them recognise their duty to God. We wish that we could compel men to be all that God wishes them to be. We would gladly have them dragooned into righteousness. But that is not God's way. He desires the free, loving, joyful service of sons, and all that force can compel is the grudging service of slaves. And the death of Christ, with its marvellous and unspeakable love, has melted hearts that were hard as the nether millstone. Not power, nor knowledge, nor even righteousness, is the force that redeems the world, but love. He who would save men must be prepared to die for them.

And this is the encouragement that the writer brings to his readers. They were enduring a hard battle. But it was the same battle as Christ Himself endured. And it had the same saving influence. They were filling up that which was lacking in the sufferings of Christ. All who were sharers in the sufferings were doing the same work, and would share in the glory.

The writer emphasises the glory of self-sacrificing love by telling how the death of Christ is the theme of the praises of earth and heaven. "And when He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the four

and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb. And they sing a new song, saying, Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase unto God with Thy blood men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation, and madest them to be unto our God a kingdom and priests; and they reign upon the earth." It was a new song, for it had a new theme, a theme new to heaven itself. It sang of a new revelation of the love of the heart of God. And the song is taken up in ever widening circles. The many angels that fill the courts of heaven join in the song: "Worthy is the Lamb that hath been slain to receive the power, and riches, and wisdom, and might, and honour, and glory, and blessing." And the farthest regions of the universe swell the anthem. Every created thing says, "Unto Him that sitteth on the throne, and unto the Lamb, be the blessing, and the honour, and the glory, and the dominion, for ever and ever." And what John means to suggest by this ever widening circle of song is, that the inhabitants of heaven recognise the sacrifice of the Lamb as all-powerful and sovereign, and that the time will come when the inhabitants of earth will recognise it too. The glamour of power shall fade

away. And in increasing measure the spirit that led Jesus to die upon the Cross shall shine with undimmed lustre in the eyes of men. And so would he stimulate his readers to turn their eyes from the passing glory of earth's greatness and power to the excelling glory that streams from the Cross of Christ, and bathes all His followers in its light. And the question for us, too, is, Do we see it? Do we recognise it? Are we trying to array ourselves in it? Ah! how unfitting it is that those who reap the greatest benefit from the Cross, to whom it is everything, should be the last to recognise its glory—that mankind should bring a lagging song to its honour. But, in spite of human blindness to that glory, the day will come, nay, is already coming, when to the Lamb that was slain every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that He is Lord of all.

V

THE SEALS—THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

"And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals."—REV. vi. 1.

THE Lamb that had been slain was alone found worthy to loose the seals and open the book of the Divine purposes. Stripped of symbolic language, this means that power alone, wisdom alone, righteousness alone, could not make of man all that God intended him to be. Only a God who is Love, who gives Himself to meet the needs of man, who gives Himself to the uttermost, who spared not His only begotten Son but delivered Him up to death, only such an One, and by such means, is able to lead forth human history to its goal, and make man all that it is in him to become. That is the teaching of the fourth and fifth chapters. Behind the play of visible things is the unseen God, the Father, the Lover, and the Saviour of mankind. In spite of all appearances to the contrary, the spiritual world

has the destiny of the earth in its hands. This world, the place of events and changes, is linked to heaven, the home of eternal, unchanging realities. It is not swimming in a sea of chance currents and forces. God has it in His hands. Its history is His charge. And He is bringing His purposes to fulfilment, for He is adequate in character to bring them to fulfilment. He is willing to pay the price—He has paid the price—of all that His heart desires. The Lamb was slain.

Now, what is the Lamb said to do? He opens the seals of a sealed book. He reads what is already written therein. He brings to actuality a purpose already formed and fixed. He does not introduce something new into the purpose of God. He does not alter God's will. He unfolds it, realises it, brings to actuality what God intended from the beginning with regard to man. He does not open a door for man to enter into a new and different life from that for which God made him at first. He carries out God's eternal purpose respecting man. God set the human race on a journey. He gave it a goal to strive after and reach. But instead of taking the direct road to his destination, man left the path. He began to wander round and round in ways that made no progress, but that led

him even farther from the goal than he was when he started. And Christ comes to him while he is thus wandering. He does not give him a new destination. He does not set another goal before him. But He guides him back to the path which he has left, and sets him to walk anew towards his former goal. Or, to take another illustration, God brought man into the world a little child spiritually, but a child that He meant to grow up into a strong spiritual manhood. But instead of growing up to mature life with never a day's illness to set back his growth, man was affected with sickness of soul, with sin. He advances towards manhood through a sickly youth. And Christ, the Great Physician, helps to keep the disease under, reinforces the powers of health, and brings the sickly child through the weakness unto the perfect man. Christ does not help man to become something other than God's design with him was. He helps him to become all that God meant him to be. He opens the seals, and brings God's purpose to fulfilment.

We now come to consider the contents of the sixth chapter. And before asking what John meant to reveal for the encouragement of his readers, we shall enquire what the imagery denotes.

As seal after seal is opened, there come forth apparitions representing various elements, which we recognise as present in the complex life of the time.

When He opened the first seal, there came forth a white horse, and he that sat on it had a bow. And there was given unto him a crown. And he came forth, conquering and to conquer. The imagery suggests *Conquest.* The crown is the emblem of victory. But who is the conqueror? The key lies in the bow. It was not a Roman conquest, for the Roman soldiers did not use the bow. It was the conquest of Rome by some barbarian power. Now, the nation which at this time was the formidable rival of Rome was the Parthians, whose characteristic weapon was the bow, with which they could shoot with unerring aim, even when advancing or retreating on horseback. The first vision, then, denotes a Parthian conquest.

When He opened the second seal, there came forth a fiery-red horse; and to him that sat thereon it was given "to take peace from the earth, and that they should slay one another." And he was armed with a sharp sword. These symbols suggest *War*, perhaps *Civil War.*

And when the third seal was opened, there came forth a black horse, and he that sat

thereon had a balance in his hand. And a voice was heard proclaiming, "A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and the oil and the wine hurt thou not." The Greek word translated "measure" denoted the allowance of food for a common soldier or a working-man for one day; and a penny, equal to about eightpence halfpenny of our money, was a day's wage. Food was to be eaten by measure, and all that a man could earn by a day's labour was a day's food for himself. Food was to be at scarcity prices. And scarcity in the necessaries of life would only be aggravated by the fact that the luxuries were to be untouched. Over and over again have the miseries of a besieged army been intensified by the fact that while food was scarce, wine was abundant. This third vision, then, indicates *Scarcity* or *Famine*.

When the fourth seal was opened, there came forth a pale or livid horse, and Death the reaper sat upon him; and he was followed by Hades, who gathers the sheaves that Death reaps. And they had authority to kill, with the sword and famine, and with death or pestilence, and with the wild beasts of the field. These symbols represent the usual accompaniments of war and famine, pestilence

and the consequent encroachment by the wild beasts on the domain of man.

> "And so there grew great tracks of wilderness,
> Wherein the beast was ever more and more,
> But man was less and less."

In this fourth vision, then, we have *Plague* or *Pestilence.*

When the fifth seal was opened, the seer saw beneath the altar the souls which had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. We need not enquire, "What altar?" and "What souls?" God's altar is always and everywhere. In all ages of the world's history God's witnesses have been slain, by the sword, by the hemlock-cup, by the fire. Their blood cries to God for the accomplishment of all that they died to bring about. And this is the bitterness of their situation, that their cry seems to evoke no answer from God. But there is given to them the white robe of purity from all that was unworthy in their testimony; and they are bidden wait a little while, till the number of the martyrs for the truth is fulfilled. Here, then, is suggested *Persecution*, aggravated by perplexity at the fact that God seems to give no sign of interest.

When the sixth seal was opened, there

occurred terrible phenomena of Nature, earthquake and eclipse, falling stars and shrinking heavens, and trembling, shifting earth. Perhaps the writer means to indicate by these physical symbols rather *Social Revolution* and upheaval, the phenomena that are connected with the breaking up of a great organism like the Roman Empire. Whether the catastrophe is physical or social, it is such as to strike terror into the hearts of all earth's great ones, whose position is imperilled by the shaking of familiar things from their places.

These, then, were the contents of the sealed book. Conquest, Civil War, Famine, Pestilence, Persecution and God's silence regarding it, Physical or Social Catastrophe, are the phenomena that are passed before us. Now, what can we say about them?

I. *They were elements of contemporary history.* They were not imaginary horrors. They were happening every day in some province of the Roman Empire. They were entering into the life of the readers of this book. And they could not be ignored. Anything that professed to be a philosophy of life must take account of them. A shallow optimist might turn away his eyes from them, but a prophet must look steadily at them. If he has any hope to hold out to his readers, it

must be hope in spite of them nay, through them. They were familiar in the life of the time. Sometimes the surface of our life is mildly ruffled by an invasion scare, but we know nothing of the gloom that lay upon the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire that were exposed to the Parthian terror. War, Famine, Pestilence, were continually raging in some part of the Empire. Persecution was embittering the life of the Christians, as has always been the case with those who held the testimony of God in a world that knew Him not. Some of the cities to which John was writing had recently suffered severely from earthquakes. Or if we take the view that the revolution was social, there were everywhere signs, clear to the seeing eye, that the vast fabric of the Empire was on the threshold of mighty changes. Assuredly John was writing of what both he and his readers were seeing and hearing every day.

Now, while the visions that followed upon the opening of the seals took such forms as represented elements of contemporary history, we are not to think that these first-century phenomena exhausted their significance. The sealed book of history is always being unlocked. Similar phenomena form the background of the life of every age. If the

Romans lived in the shadow of the Parthian terror, we are not unacquainted with wars and rumours of wars, with scares of invasion, and the burdens of militarism which they originate and intensify. If our land has long been happily without civil war in its crudest form, we are not unfamiliar still with the spirit that might awaken its fires. Party faces party with suspicion and hatred. Class sets itself against class. Between Labour and Capital there is almost constant feud, with all the bitterness of thought and feeling and speech engendered thereby, and with the want and misery and suffering that fall upon thousands of the innocent, through the endeavours of each side to gain advantage over the other. If widespread famines are less frequent than of yore, they still seem to fall upon India with periodic regularity, claiming their victims by millions; while even at home, with all our wealth, we have still hunger through unemployment, and poverty through the desolating influences of vice. If the advance of medical science has freed Europe from pestilences that were wont to ravage it, luxury and idleness have brought new diseases in their train, and the physical degeneracy of the race is a commonplace of medical speech. If in civilised lands men are no longer called upon

to suffer death or imprisonment or exile for conscience' sake, there are still forms of persecution brought to bear upon those who follow Christ. And is it not true that every breath of change—and when is the wind of change not blowing hard?—means the imperilling and shifting of the relative positions of men? Every age seems to itself to be on the point of breaking up. Such phenomena in our own time correspond to those with which John's readers were so familiar in the first century. "The signs of the times" are always with us. And they cannot be ignored in our day any more than they could be in John's. They still furnish an important element in the argument against a religious view of the world. In any explanation of things they have to be included. And if the religion of Jesus is unable to find a place for them in its scheme, it fails to satisfy the human mind, and is not adequate to meet the needs of man. The forces within the seals have not passed away; they have only taken other forms and embodiment. And therefore this book which John wrote, if it was sufficient to meet the Church's problem then, is sufficient, but not more than sufficient, to meet the Church's problem now.

II. *These phenomena were subject to Christ.* They were part of the machinery by which

He was advancing the purpose of God. They entered into every life, and exercised their influence upon it. And the essence of the comfort that John was able to give to his readers is, that they were under the control of Christ. Christ opens the seals and lets them come forth. They are instruments with which He works, forces non-moral in themselves, falling upon saint and sinner alike, but which become in His hands the means of moral and spiritual growth to His followers. They are in the hand of Christ; and surely it makes all the difference in the world whether a rod is in the hand of a Saviour or of a tyrant. Now, it may be difficult for us to believe that Christ controls these forces. It must have been difficult for John's readers to believe that Christ could make anything of these terrible phenomena that seemed as if they would destroy all social order. They could not but feel them to be destructive. But John tells them to have faith that these things are subject to Christ. Even John could not see this till he was in the Spirit. And it is a like faith in Christ that will enable us to have hope. This faith is stimulated as we look back upon the history of the world, and see how forces apparently destructive have been turned to the advantage and progress of the

human race. We believe that war and conquest, famine and pestilence, persecution and social revolution, are not obstinate and stubborn hindrances to all progress, are not things that defy God to make anything of them. And as we look back from a sufficient distance we can see that He has been able to turn them to man's good. The Northern nations came down upon Roman civilisation and swept it away in a flood of barbarism. But it is from these fresh and vigorous races that the civilisation of Europe has come. War must at all times be counted a great evil, and the time is perhaps not far distant when nations will take saner methods of settling their differences. And yet, taking human nature as it is, we cannot see that anything but a bloody war, and, what is most tragic in a nation's life, civil war, could have swept the curse of slavery from America. Famine in one country has often been the means of driving men to the unworked resources of the world. Famine in India has produced desperate suffering. Yet it has furnished us with the occasion of shewing our fellow-subjects the reality of Christian sympathy. It has thrown into Christian hands hundreds of children, who may be trained to be the fathers and mothers of a Christian race.

Pestilence and disease have called forth the heroism and devotion of the nurse and the doctor, and have been the means of keeping hearts soft that might have become hard. Persecution has always had the result of bringing new life into the Church, rousing it from indifference, recalling it from laxity, putting it on its mettle, purifying it as gold is tried and purified in the fire. Even so great a social earthquake as the French Revolution, in which the cords that bound society together were snapped, and through which the old order of things in France was brought level with the ground, and all the thrones of Europe were shaken,—even this terror and upheaval were the harbingers of undreamed-of liberties to the whole civilised world. If we take a wide enough view of what has happened in history, we can see abundant evidence that conquest, war, famine, pestilence, and revolution are not irresponsible and wanton forces running amuck through the order of society. They are under the control of Him who has the welfare of mankind at heart. They are instruments which He employs to further His gracious purposes. They are led forth by the Saviour who opens the seals.

What a heartening message this would be to those who were living in the hard condi-

tions of the first century! The forces that seemed wholly destructive were in the power of Christ. The Lamb opens the seals. They were not hard facts that Christ could make nothing of. Divine Love could make them conducive to the progress of mankind. And should we not find encouragement likewise in the fact that these present-day forces that we fear, and which we can do so little to create, or destroy, or turn aside from their path, which are so beyond human control that men seem to be but their sport and plaything, are not beyond the control of God? that they are in the hands of Christ? Is it not a cheering thought that there is no such thing as pure destruction in the world, but that destruction and reconstruction go hand in hand? If the great aim of our life is that the Kingdom of God should come in the world—and what lower aim is worthy?—is it not something to make us rejoice, that God's purpose cannot be frustrated by the destructive forces of Nature and Society, but on the contrary is being promoted and furthered by them? Conquest, war, famine, pestilence, persecution and perplexity of mind, social upheaval,—it is natural that we should fear them; they seem so mighty in comparison with the life of man. But the faith that they are all in the hands of Christ,

obedient to His word, carrying out His pleasure, should give us heart, and make us steadfast and unmoveable in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as we know that none of these things is able to make our labour in vain in the Lord.

VI

SAFETY AND BLESSEDNESS

"And I saw another angel ascend from the sunrising, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a great voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads."—REV. vii. 2, 3.

THE sixth chapter closes amid the terror of the great ones of the earth, whose position is menaced by the upheavals of Nature and Society. "And the kings of the earth, and the princes, and the chief captains, and the rich, and the strong, and every bondman and freeman, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains; and they say to the mountains and to the rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of Their wrath is come; and who is able to stand?" But the question would also arise, What was to be the lot of God's people in the midst of these

tremendous catastrophes? Was there no danger that the indiscriminating messengers of judgment, the blind forces of destruction, would sweep them away? War and famine and pestilence and earthquake made no distinction between those that served God and those that served Him not. The righteous equally with the wicked were sharers in and sufferers through these catastrophes. If famine spread its shadow over a land, no ravens brought bread and flesh to the saints. If war planted its bloody foot upon a country, the righteous as well as the wicked were crushed under it. The phenomena of Nature and of Society knew no distinctions. And might it not be that they who had trusted in God would be swept away by these giant forces?

To these questions, the seventh chapter gives the answer in two visions, which we shall consider in turn.

I. The burden of the first vision is that *those who are the servants of God are safe whatever may happen.* The catastrophes that overtake the world cannot touch them.

There is a preliminary thought suggested in the first few verses of the chapter—how much the world owes to the existence of God's people in it. "After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the

earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that no wind should blow on the earth, or on the sea, or upon any tree. And I saw another angel ascend from the sunrising, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a great voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we shall have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." The judgments of God are held in leash till the sealing of His servants is accomplished. It is not their beauty or their usefulness that wins for yellow mustard and scarlet poppies toleration among the corn. To interfere with them might hurt the growing grain. And for the sake of the grain, the farmer lets them pass through all the stages of growth, and shed their seeds to trouble him another year. So, in our Lord's parable, the tares are let alone lest the wheat should be disturbed. And the fact that the world is the stage on which the servants of God are being fitted for eternal life wins even for its evils His long patience.

> "Sure if our eyes were purged to trace
> God's unseen armies hovering round,
> We should behold, by angels' grace,
> The four strong winds of heaven fast bound,

Their downward sweep a moment stayed
On ocean cave and forest glade,
Till the last flower of autumn shed
Her funeral odours on her dying bed.

Little they dream, those haughty souls,
Whom empires own with bended knee,
What tardy fate their own controls,
Together linked by fate's decree;—
As bloodhounds hush their baying wild,
To wanton with some fearless child,
So Famine waits, and War, with greedy eyes,
Till some repenting heart be ready for the skies."

We now come to the main lesson of the vision, that the safety of God's servants is assured amid all the destructive forces of Nature. It has been held by some that the writer has taken over bodily an extract from some Jewish writing, because it set forth the lesson that he wished to teach. And we can easily recognise how full of suggestion the picture would be, and with what power of encouragement it would come home to the Christians.

1. The thought, that every individual is a member of a larger whole and is necessary to its completeness, would assure the Christians of their safety. One of a number of precious stones lying loose on a tray might be lost and not readily missed; but one that had dropped from a necklace would be missed at once.

And the vision teaches that Christians are not isolated individuals, the loss of any one of whom would be unnoticed. They are members of God's Israel, of God's chosen nation, of God's own family. And this thought would be suggested to their minds by the stately enumeration of the tribes.

Various interpretations of the sealed Israelites have been given. The most obvious apparently is that the writer is referring to the saints of the old dispensation. But on further thought this does not seem likely. The Jewish nation and its tribes are part of the symbolism of the chapter, used to suggest ideas regarding the servants of God, whether Jews or Gentiles. All that Israel was to God, the followers of Jesus are to Him. They are His Israel, loved, chosen, guided by Him, the objects of His care. They are bound together by His kingship over them. They cannot be looked upon as isolated individuals. They are members of His Church. The children of Abraham according to the flesh were a symbol of the children of Abraham according to the spirit. And God exercises the same loving care over His new Israel as He did over His old. "The Lord knoweth them that are His." God has a chosen people, whom He knows, and who are the

objects of His care. And to be among the chosen of God is to be safe.

2. But the Christians would be further comforted by the assurance that each of God's servants has a mark put upon him, whereby he is destined for salvation. He is sealed with God's seal. How richly suggestive would this idea of the sealing be to readers of the Old Testament! Perhaps they would remember how God put a mark upon Cain, lest any one meeting him should slay him. They would surely remember how, on the first Passover night, the lintels and the door-posts of every Israelite house were sprinkled with the blood of the slain lamb, and how the mark was a protection against the entrance of the destroying angel. They would remember also the vision in the ninth chapter of Ezekiel: "And behold, six men came from the way of the upper gate . . . every man with his slaughter weapon in his hand; and one man in the midst of them clothed in linen, with a writer's ink-horn by his side. . . . And the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark on the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof. And to the others He said in mine hearing, Go ye

through the city after him, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity . . . but come not near any man upon whom is the mark." The mark was a guarantee of their safety in the hour of judgment. Thousands might fall at their side, and tens of thousands at their right hand, but the destruction would not come near them. For they had the seal of God upon them.

And the Christians were likewise safe because they had the mark of God upon them. They were in possession of a life that the forces of judgment could not reach. They were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise unto a day of complete redemption. And against that spiritual life the destroying forces of the world had no power. It lay in another sphere from the sphere of their operation. It was hid with Christ in God.

3. But the vision would suggest the comforting thought, that the safety of the Christians was necessary to the completeness of God's people. It emphasises that completeness. The number of the sealed was one hundred and forty and four thousand, the perfect number raised to the heavenly power. So the chosen of God will be complete. Not one of those gifted to Christ will be plucked out of His Father's hand.

The vision doubtless suggested to the first

readers many other ideas than these we have touched upon. It would be full of suggestion. But if it suggested even these ideas, that God's servants are members of His family, that they are in possession of a life over which the forces of destruction have no power, that their safety is necessary to the completeness of the purpose of God, was there not sufficient in it to encourage them? And is there not sufficient to assure us likewise that, whatever may happen to us, we are safe from anything that can really be called an evil, and that the true attitude for those who are hidden in the secret of God's presence is one of "profound calm, of quiet confidence, of invincible courage, of bright hope, of unquestioning trust in hours of private distress or of public danger." "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee, because he trusteth in Thee."

II. The second half of the chapter is occupied with a second vision, in which *the future blessedness of God's servants* is set forth with the same purpose of heartening those that were enduring affliction. It is not enough for Christians to be assured that they will be brought safely through life. There is a source of strength and courage more effective still. And in this second vision there is such a

presentation of the life of the redeemed as shall vindicate the affliction of this present time by the fulness and glory that issue from it.

"After these things I saw, and behold, a great multitude, which no man could number, out of every nation, and of all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, arrayed in white robes, and palms in their hands." The Church of their time was small and despised, but it was part of a great multitude that no man could number. The Church of their time was struggling against pagan vices, but it would be arrayed in the white robes of holiness. The Church of their time was crushed and broken, but it would bear the palms of festal joy and victory. The Church of their time was moaning and fainting, but it would one day give its voice to swell the anthem of glory to God: "Salvation unto our God which sitteth on the throne, and unto the Lamb." The contrast between the Church as they knew it and the Church as the faith of John saw it was what they needed to see in order that they might be strengthened to endure.

But the vision goes on to give the explanation of the presence of this great multitude before the throne. "One of the elders

answered," that is, answered the unspoken, wondering thought of the seer, "saying unto me, These which are arrayed in the white robes, who are they, and whence came they?" To answer that question is beyond human skill. The ignorance of earth is unable to account for the presence of man in the heavenly place. "I know not; but, my lord, thou knowest; tell me." "And he said to me, These are they which come out of the great tribulation, and they washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God." They are there, not as brands plucked from the burning, charred and blackened, rescued from complete destruction by Divine mercy, but as gold that has passed through the fire, purified and perfected by its heat. They have not been saved from tribulation, but they have been saved through tribulation, and brought to the perfection of spiritual life by its discipline. "One has to say for oneself — at least I have," says Carlyle, "that all the good I ever got came to me in the shape of sorrow." Does the tribulation of this present time, whether it be the persecution of the world, or the thousand and one troubles that are incidental to living the Christian life here, need any other justifi-

cation than this, that it is fitting the people of God for the perfect life in His presence? No chastening seemeth for the present to be joyous but grievous. But if it yield the fruits of righteousness to those that are exercised thereby, is it not justified? As Paul told the Christians of Iconium, through many tribulations we must enter into the Kingdom of God. And if we have no tribulations of our own, and if we are not taking to our hearts the world's sin and sorrow and alienation from its Father, we may well have doubts whether we are bringing forth the fruits of righteousness, or are sharers in the Kingdom of God.

"Therefore are they before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He that sitteth on the throne shall spread His tabernacle over them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun strike upon them, nor any heat: for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of water: and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes." One does not need to dwell upon these beautiful symbols. They have not to be crushed to let their fragrance flow forth. They woo the soul by the perfection and fulness of the life that they suggest.

It is natural that we should find it difficult to lift our hearts to the level of this chapter, to serene confidence in God amid the troubles of life and the changes and catastrophes of the time. It is a great demand that the writer makes upon the faith of his readers. It is perhaps too great a demand for any age except one that is passing through the tribulations. It is no easy matter to live in the faith that, whatever happens, no evil can come to us if we are the servants of God; that loss is gain; that imprisonment may be true freedom; that death may be the gate of life. Yet the difficulty is only that which belongs to every act of faith. Every demand that the spiritual world makes upon us is a hard one. We go into the darkened room, where lies all that remains on earth of husband or wife or child, and look upon the pale face that once kindled with love and joy, and the still form that once moved through the house like a gleam of light. We see the coffin carried forth from the home; we follow it to the grave, and leave it there, and bring back our aching heart to an empty world. We realise the difference that death has made. And yet in the face of all the evidence of eye and hand and heart, we are asked to have faith that the dear one is not dead. Of

that we have the strongest assurance that words can give. We have the saying of Christ Himself: "Whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die." Sense pours in upon us all the evidence of death; but faith speaks to us of life that is uninterrupted. And yet how difficult it is to live as if it were true. Well may the apostle speak of "the labour of faith." Faith is a task. It is not easy, it was never meant to be easy, to believe in the spiritual world. But it is the task of faith. And the same demand is made upon us in connection with the message of this chapter. It is no easy thing to believe that nothing can hurt us, neither loss nor sorrow nor death. It is no easy thing to take up the song and say, "We will not fear, though the earth do change, and though the mountains be moved in the heart of the sea." But it is faith's labour. It becomes faith's achievement. Sense forces upon us the thoughts of danger, of suffering, of death. But faith opens up to our view the life of spiritual rest and fulness and blessedness; the life of worship "before the throne of God"; of service "day and night in His temple"; of protection and fellowship underneath His outspread tabernacle; of satisfaction and blessedness and undimmed

joy:—"They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun strike upon them, nor any heat: for the Lamb shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of water: and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes." These too are symbols. And the reality is richer than the symbol. And it is the possession of those who through faith in Christ attain victory over the world.

VII

THE TRUMPETS—VOICES OF WARNING

"And when He opened the seventh seal, there followed a silence in heaven about the space of half an hour."—REV. viii. 1.

SIX seals have already been opened. Six of the elements of contemporary history—conquest by a foreign invader, civil war, famine, pestilence, persecution, social upheaval—have been passed before our view; and the seventh alone, the climax and consummation of them all, remains undisclosed. And heaven waits in breathless, trembling suspense for the disclosure. "There was silence in heaven."

And in the silence the fruits of the long travail of God's saints are brought to ripeness. "Another angel came and stood over the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should add it unto the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the

throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand. And the angel taketh the censer; and he filled it with the fire of the altar, and cast it upon the earth: and there followed thunders, and voices, and lightnings, and an earthquake." The prayers of men have been rising to God through all the ages. They have often been unseasonable, impatient, even selfish prayers. They have craved as an immediate boon what God was not ready to grant. They have besought Him to take the earth by storm. Man has not God's marvellous long-suffering with wrong. The blood of the martyrs has been crying for speedy vengeance. The cry of the oppressed has been rising for speedy deliverance. But with all their imperfection, there has been something of permanent value in these prayers. In as far as they have risen from souls devoted to God, they have been for the judgment, and that means for the salvation, of the world, and the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. Ever at the heart of them has been the desire that God would not "leave His world to welter in its crime and wretchedness," but that He would redeem it, and vindicate His Name in it. And these prayers have often seemed to rise

unheard. Men have thought that they were crying to a deaf Heaven, for no answer seemed to come. What was the use of praying when the prayer never seemed to be heard? But God's time to answer comes at last. Incense is given into the angel's hand, and the prayers are borne into the presence of God in a time when He will hear. They come up before Him with acceptance. And the answer comes down in rich abundance. I think that if these chapters had no other lesson for us than this, that no true prayer is ever lost, that no worthy aspiration, even in an imperfect prayer, is wasted, but that all contribute to the final answer, they would contain for us an invaluable message of comfort.

But the answer comes in God's way. We pray, "Thy Kingdom come"; and we think of an unseen process of advance, the peaceful conversion of the world to God. But God answers with the thunders and the lightnings and the voices and the earthquake. The coming of the Kingdom means the sweeping away of much. Old oppressions, hoary abuses, deep-seated vices, have to be taken out of the way. The only possible answer to our prayers may be the thunder and the earthquake. These may be the birth-pangs of the

new earth for which we are praying. "God's way is in the sea, and His path in the great waters, and His footsteps are not known."

And now the seventh seal is opened. It will help us to understand the meaning of it if we remember that each of the seals represents some element in contemporary history. They were every-day phenomena. And it is in the same direction that we naturally look for the explanation of the seventh. It too must stand for something that was manifest to the readers of the book. But the force within each of the six seals was represented by one distinct image. Not so the content of the seventh. That content is too momentous, too complex, too near the heart of things, to be thus summed up. Accordingly, the seventh seal is unfolded in seven parts. Seven angels receive seven trumpets to sound, and, as each one sounds, some element that enters into the full content of the seventh seal is disclosed.

Now, when we read these two chapters, the eighth and the ninth, as a whole, what general impression do we get? Do we not get a very distinct impression of national decay, of growing inability on the part of the nation to cope with destructive forces, of its having passed the climax of its vigour, and

being already on the down-grade? And herein lies the seriousness of the situation. War, famine, pestilence, and social change occur in the life of all growing nations; and where there is sufficient young vigour to resist their evil effects they can even be made conducive to national growth. But when they occur in the life of a nation whose vitality is waning, they only serve to hasten the progress of the decay. And this is the condition of the time revealed in these chapters. Vigour was already departing from the Empire. It was going downhill. It was this fact that rendered all the other elements serious and fatal.

In these chapters John lays bare the elements of this national decay.

At the voice of the first trumpet there is revealed a blight upon the productive powers of Nature, such as always accompanies an unrighteous and tyrannical government. The cultivation of the ground was being ruined. The richest portions of Italy were being destroyed through slave-labour. The population of Rome depended for its food-supplies on Egypt without giving anything useful in return.

The second trumpet announces a decaying maritime strength, decaying commerce, perhaps

decaying fisheries. Great calamities, deaths by drowning and massacre by pirates, were taking place on the sea.

The third trumpet discloses some element that embittered and poisoned life—what it was we cannot say with certainty—perhaps a literature that was pouring corruption into Society.

The fourth trumpet may be meant to proclaim the fall of rulers by assassination. Emperor after emperor and chieftain after chieftain went out "like quenched suns and darkened stars." And could there be any clearer indication of national decay than what was already becoming chronic in the Roman Empire, the speedy elevation of obscure individuals to the throne, followed by their no less speedy downfall? The stability of the throne is an evidence and guarantee of the stability of the nation, as may be seen by comparing the histories of Israel and Judah. In all these directions, then, there were sure signs of national decay.

But John has not yet mentioned what is the surest sign of all. We wonder that he has not touched upon it sooner. But that he has not overlooked it, or underestimated it, is seen in the impressive way in which he now calls attention to it: "And I saw, and I heard an

eagle, flying in mid heaven, saying with a great voice, Woe, woe, woe, for them that dwell on the earth, by reason of the other voices of the trumpet of the three angels, who are yet to sound." These words emphasise the impressiveness of the subject which he has now reached.

"And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star from heaven fallen unto the earth." In these words we have an epitome of the history of the Roman Empire. We sometimes speak of Israel as the chosen nation, as if God had fixed His thoughts upon her to the exclusion of every other. But the history of Israel itself teaches us that God is the God of all nations, that He has placed all under the same laws, that He has given each its place and its task in the world, and that He judges every one with impartial judgment. And when we read the early history of the Roman nation, I do not think that we can escape the impression that God had a work for Rome to do, just as He had for Israel. Rome had a lesson to teach the world. It was not the same lesson as Israel had to teach, but the lesson that God had fitted her to teach. God set her in the heaven of human history to give light like a star. And she did give light. What a noble example of courage, perse-

verance, patience, and self-sacrifice did the Roman Republic exhibit to the world! What a splendid race of men, simple-living, enduring, devout, did she produce! Piety in the widest sense, including patriotism and filial love as well as religion, was the outstanding characteristic of her moral ideal. Generation after generation wrought out its destiny with earnest self-forgetfulness. That was Rome as she had been, a star in the heavens, giving light. But the star had fallen to the earth. Luxury had eaten into her vigour and courage. Selfishness and indulgence had displaced devotion. Her ancient piety was a dead thing, embalmed in the song of Virgil. High ideals had given place to the pursuit of low pleasures. Faith in the Divine was dead. Such was Rome as she was in the days of John, a star fallen to the earth.

And to a power so fallen there is given the key of the abyss, from which issue all manner of corrupt passions, degrading superstitions, and horrid vices, to torture mankind. These are the natural issue of such a fall. Can there be any doubt that by the scorpion-locusts John means the corruptions that were destroying the lives of the citizens of the Roman Empire? Their province is to torment those who have not the seal of God on their fore-

heads; and is it not true that passions, superstitions, vices, are a torment to those over whom they have obtained the mastery? Do they not bear men down by the suddenness and fury of their onset, like a charge of horse in the day of battle? Do they not present themselves with the human face, as things natural to man, with the plausible argument of humanness? Do they not offer the promise of a spurious royalty and liberty and gain, wearing as it were crowns like unto gold? And do they not entangle men in the glamour of their fascination and witchery? "They have hair as the hair of women." And is there not a murderous cruelty underneath all their superficial attractiveness? "They have teeth like the teeth of lions." And have they not stings in their tails, which leave behind them a baneful legacy to those who have harboured them—the agony of remorse, the torture of an accusing conscience, the poison of guilt? And they have over them as king the angel of the abyss, whose name is Apollyon, the Destroyer. It is of his nature that they partake. It is his commands that they obey. It is his work that they do. It would not be possible to give a truer picture of sin and vice and social corruption, with its sham gains and its indisputable loss,

with its superficial fascination and its inevitable destruction. Nor would it be easy to give a better description of the character of that age, with its weariness, its satiety without satisfaction, its exhaustion, its frequent recourse to suicide, than the writer gives in these words: "And in those days men shall seek death, and shall in no wise find it; and they shall desire to die, and death fleeth from them." The very plague-spot of national decay was the corruption of morals.

And when a nation has reached a state of rottenness like that, when all its pristine vigour has departed from it, it only needs some attacking power to sweep it away. The touch of a hand is sufficient to bring the rotten branch to the ground. And so we hear a voice saying to the angel of the sixth trumpet, "Loose the four angels which are bound at the great river Euphrates," the barbarian hosts, that wait for God's time and summons. And when that summons comes, their onset is irresistible.

With what marvellous insight does the writer marshal the forces of the time! He has no hope that the Kingdom of Christ can come in any other way than through the overthrow of the Roman Empire. The poison had gone too deep into its vitals for any hope of

reformation. A new and more vigorous organism must take its place. This, too, was the purpose of God.

Now, if a prophet were to arise and dissect our modern life with the keen insight, and judge it from the spiritual point of view, of John, what would be his verdict? He would see many grievous evils. He could put his finger on some deadly plague-spots. They would not necessarily be the same evils as John lays bare in the life of his time. They would be the evils of our own day. Would not a trumpet proclaim the danger to a healthy national life in "indecent, atheistic, inhuman, devitalising fiction"? Would not a trumpet proclaim the danger that lies in widespread intemperance and gambling? Would not a trumpet proclaim the presence in our midst of shapes like locusts—hideous, ugly, destructive passions and vices that are ever rising from the abyss? Yes, there would be trumpets proclaiming the presence of moral dangers in our life. But what would be the final verdict? Would the prophet see enough of moral vigour to enable us to throw these evils off? Would he announce destruction or final victory? That is the question which the present generation is answering, not in words, but in life and action. That is the Sphinx's riddle

which we are trying to solve, which we must solve or be devoured. Before us God has placed the alternatives: "To them that by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and incorruption, eternal life; but unto them that are factious, and obey not the truth, but obey unrighteousness, shall be wrath and indignation, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that worketh evil." One or other of these two alternatives we are now choosing, even though we may know it not.

It seems to lie in the symbol "trumpets" that these judgments are primarily warnings intended to bring the world to repentance. We shall have better opportunity of considering this when we come to deal with another series of judgments in a later chapter. Meanwhile it is sufficient to call attention to the fact. And what is the effect of the warning? "The rest of mankind, which were not killed with these plagues, repented not of the works of their hands, that they should not worship devils, and the idols of gold, and of silver, and of brass, and of stone, and of wood; which can neither see, nor hear, nor walk: and they repented not of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts." So was it then; so is it now; so

will it be to the end. The disasters wrought by God's judgments, the terrible retributions that moral evils bring upon the lives of individuals and nations, are ineffectual to make men think and to bring them to repentance. Those who have the seal of God upon their foreheads hear in them the voice of God, and rejoice that He is cleansing the world even though it be by fire. But those who know not God remain unawakened, unconvicted, unrepentant. How often has this been illustrated in history! When the Plague was raging in London in 1665, on the doors of many of the houses were written the words, "Lord, have mercy on us." And yet we are told that never was there a time when crime and riot and vice were more rampant. Sometimes we are tempted to wish that God would speak in some startling judgment that would terrify sinners into repentance. It is a vain wish. "It is everlastingly true that not the fire, and not the earthquake, and not the blast rending the mountains" can prevail over the stubborn and rebellious heart of man, but the still small voice that insinuates its persuasion into the conscience, and melts the heart's hardness. Not the thunder of God's judgments, but the pleading voice of Jesus; not the terrors of the great white throne, but the

love and sacrifice of the Cross, are able to bring the world to repentance, and cool its hot life with healing tears, and give it strength to rise by repeated self-conquests, on stepping-stones of its dead self, to higher things. "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, if one rise from the dead."

Such seems to be the meaning of this vision, narrated in the eighth and ninth chapters. Let us recall our second thought[1] concerning the seals, for it is applicable to this seventh seal also. This seal, like the others, is opened by the Lamb that was slain. It was in the purpose of God that the Empire of Rome, thus fallen, should pass away before the Kingdom of Christ could come. It was morally necessary that it should pass away. And yet how difficult it must have been for these Christians to see it! how bitter, perhaps, for them, from their position as citizens, to have to acquiesce in it! For in their eyes Rome stood for all that was stable; and yet the message that John sends them is that it will pass away. It *must*, for its disease has gone too deep for cure. But he tells them also that the passing of Rome will not frustrate the purpose of God. And there may be a lesson here for us too. We have come to look upon

[1] P. 73.

all that is progressive, upon all that makes for righteousness and the Kingdom of Christ, as bound up in a special degree with the Saxon race. We are apt to think that if disaster came to our nation and to those most closely related to it, the very purpose of God would fail. Not so. The purpose of God is not bound up with the continuance of any particular nation. If one fails in its duty, God will raise up another. If we are false to the trust that God has committed to us, then the trust will fall from us, and be committed to some other to carry forward. If we, into whose hands the vineyard has been given, refuse to render the fruits thereof in their season, the vineyard will be taken from us and put into the hands of other husbandmen, who will give a faithful account. We have little reason, then, to glory in our high place. We have every encouragement to do our work in the fear of the Lord, waiting upon Him with reverence, seeking His grace always, believing His promises, obeying His commandments, in the faith that thus, and thus only, shall we be established.

VIII

THE LITTLE BOOK—A NEW REVELATION

"And the angel which I saw standing upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his right hand to heaven, and sware by Him that liveth for ever and ever, who created the heaven and the things that are therein, and the earth and the things that are therein, and the sea and the things that are therein, that there shall be time no longer: but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, then is finished the mystery of God, according to the good tidings which He declared to His servants the prophets."—REV. x. 5–7.

LET us recall what we have already found in the Book of Revelation. The writer has made a faithful and merciless analysis of the life of his time. He has passed in review destructive forces of society, and has emphasised the most serious feature of all, that the Empire was powerless so to cope with them as to turn them to its strength. He has given a picture of national decay, of a great trust betrayed, of a star fallen from heaven to earth. Rome has opened the abyss, and let loose a cloud of scorpion-locusts, vices and superstitions,

fascinating to the eye, but deadly to the life. And already the armies of judgment are upon the horizon, waiting for God's summons.

And the question suggests itself, "What next?" What? but that the Roman Empire be swept away! Why should it stand a dead tree? Why should it continue to plague the earth? "Cut it down, why cumbereth it the ground also?" As Carlyle would say, "For mercy's sake, a little earth, and decent burial, and oblivion."

But would not such an ending to the corruptions of the world leave the sufferings of the Christians unexplained and purposeless? Might not God have spared them the sufferings if they were to be only events amid events? The tenth chapter forms the transition to the treatment of this question. Let us first try to discover what the symbolism of the chapter means.

"And I saw another strong angel coming down out of heaven . . . and he had in his hand a little book open. . . . And the voice which I heard from heaven, I heard it again speaking with me, and saying, Go, take the book which is open in the hand of the angel that standeth upon the sea and upon the earth. And I went unto the angel, saying unto him that he should give me the little book. And

he saith unto me, Take it, and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but in thy mouth it shall be sweet as honey. And I took the little book out of the angel's hand, and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and when I had eaten it, my belly was made bitter." Now, I suppose no one has ever taken this literally. The key to its meaning is furnished by Ezekiel. "Thou, son of man, hear what I say unto thee; . . . open thy mouth, and eat what I give thee. And when I looked, behold, an hand was put forth unto me; and, lo, a roll of a book was therein; and He spread it before me; and it was written within and without: and there was written therein lamentations, and mourning, and woe. And He said unto me, Son of man, eat that thou findest; eat this roll, and go, speak unto the house of Israel. . . . Then did I eat it; and it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness." In this symbolic way does Ezekiel tell how God's thoughts became his, how, through his awakened and inspired intelligence, God's revelation came to him. Through experience of God's dealings with himself did he learn the meaning of His dealings with Israel.

And John employs the symbolism of Ezekiel for the same purpose. He endeavours to

inspire his readers with confidence in his message by telling them how his mind and heart had been enlightened by the revelation of God, and how he had attained to a deeper insight into the meaning of their circumstances. Thus the tenth chapter belongs rather to the form than to the substance of the Book of Revelation. It does not add anything to its message, but forms a joint or hinge, by which its two divisions are united.

What, then, does this chapter tell about the new revelation that came to John?

I. It indicates *the scope of the revelation.* In the fifth chapter we read of a book. Here we read of a little book. Does not this suggest that the subject is narrowed down to a more defined compass? It is natural to suppose that the contents of the little book are unfolded in the remaining chapters of Revelation. And in the light of those subsequent chapters, we can see that the writer means to suggest that he has now reached the point at which the situation specially touches those to whom he is writing. Hitherto he has been clearing the ground. Henceforth he will deal with the conflict that the Church is waging in the world.

II. The character of the revelation is symbolised in *the description of him through*

whom it is ministered. The strong angel was "arrayed with a cloud; and the rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire; . . . and he set his right foot upon the sea, and his left upon the earth; and he cried with a great voice, as a lion roareth." This description of the messenger suggests the character of the message —its mystery, its certainty, its authority, its universality of reference, its holiness, its hopefulness as embodying the faithfulness of God. And we can clearly see why the writer was at pains thus to emphasise the character and authority of the revelation that came to him. He was about to make a great demand upon the faith of the suffering Christians. And it was meet that he should make it clear that he was not leading them on to thin ice that would not bear the weight of their problem, but that he was inviting them to plant their feet on the solid ground of Divine truth, that would bear up underneath whatever weight they laid upon it.

III. *The personal and, therefore, the educative character of the revelation* is suggested by images that put in striking contrast two different methods in which such a revelation might have come to the seer. On the appearance of the angel "the seven thunders

uttered their voices." God might have revealed His mysterious ways to His servant with all the impressiveness of "the voice of Jehovah." But John would have his readers understand that in no such external way did the things that he was about to narrate come to him. "When the seven thunders uttered their voices, I was about to write: and I heard a voice from heaven saying, Seal up the things which the seven thunders uttered, and write them not." In a closer, more intimate way was the revelation made to him. He was commanded to eat the little book which he saw lying open in the angel's hand. The message that he was to deliver to his Christian readers was first a message to himself. It was a revelation to his own mind and heart and conscience. He was one with them in his need of its consolation and strength. And what had brought enlightenment and comfort to his own soul would bring enlightenment and comfort to them also. Thus does he suggest the perfect fitness of his message to meet the problem that their sufferings created.

IV. The character of the revelation is further indicated by *the effect of its reception on the seer.* It was sweet in the mouth, but afterwards bitter. How could it be sweet in the mouth if it was full of woe? How could it be

bitter afterwards if it was God's Word? The answer to these questions will become clear as we come to know the contents of the revelation. But thus far we may anticipate. It must have been sweet to John and his readers to learn that God was on their side against their persecutors. But the actual struggle, and all that it involved to the Church, could not but be bitter. This is always true. "There must be sweetness unspeakable," says a great theologian,[1] "in the actual living taste of a Divine communication; in the assurance, felt in the blood, and felt along the heart, that a portion of that law by which we are being governed has been disclosed to us;" that the love of our Father, which is behind all law and is working at every moment for the welfare and salvation of His children, is manifesting itself in the experiences that are given to ourselves. Sweet as honey! Yes, but when we come to realise how that law is defied in the world and in ourselves, how that love is trampled on and resisted in the kingdom of men and in the kingdom of the soul, how the refusing of that law and the rejecting of that love is the source of all the evils in the world, of all its

[1] F. D. Maurice, *The Apocalypse* (partly quoted and partly adapted).

oppressions and vices and miseries, and how before God's law and God's love can come to their own there must be the fierce struggle of history, with its anguish, with its broken hearts, with its sufferings, of the innocent as well as of the guilty, with its hopes deferred a thousand times,—all this is bitter to contemplate. To know that God makes His will known to us, His creatures, is sweet; but the actual experience of that will, in so far as it involves struggle and the discipline of suffering, is bitter. No suffering can ever be joyous, even though we believe that it is working out in the world the peaceable fruits of righteousness.

V. *It was a revelation that primarily had reference to the particular situation in the history of the Church, but its significance was not exhausted by the circumstances of that age.* It covers all the varied phases of the Church's conflict with the world throughout its history. It is "manifold in its application." "Wherever there is a little flock in a waste wilderness; wherever there is a Church in a world; wherever there is a power of unbelief, ungodliness, and violence, throwing itself upon Christ's faith and Christ's people, and seeking to overbear and to demolish and to destroy, . . . then, in each successive century, the words of Christ

to His first disciples adapt themselves afresh to the circumstances of His struggling servants; warn them of danger, exhort them to patience, arouse them to hope, assure them of victory; tell of a near end, for the individual and the generation; tell also of a far end, not for ever to be postponed, for time itself and for the world; predict a destruction which shall befall each enemy of the truth, and predict a destruction which shall befall the enemy himself whom each in turn has represented and served; explain the meaning of tribulation, shew whence it comes, and point to its swallowing up in glory; reveal the moving Hand above, and disclose, from behind the cloud which conceals it, the clear definite purpose and the unchanging loving will."[1] "Thou must prophesy again over many peoples and nations and tongues and kings."

One announcement made in connection with the giving of the little book must have been welcome to the writer and his readers: "The angel which I saw standing upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his right hand to heaven, and sware by Him that liveth for ever and ever, . . . that there shall be time no longer." It is generally agreed among commentators that the rendering "time," im-

[1] Vaughan, *Lectures on the Revelation.*

pressive as it sounds, does not express the true meaning of the angel's word. The contrast intended is not between time and eternity. We cannot conceive of a state in which the stream of our consciousness will not be in time. And, which is more important, there never is a moment in our existence when we are not actors in eternity. Every thought and word and deed has its place in time, but it has eternal issues. It is in a moment, but it is not of a moment. We are living in eternity now as much as ever we shall be. It is this that gives life its nobleness and its significance. What the writer means to convey is that there shall be no further delay in fulfilling the purpose of God. The contents of the little book are about to be unfolded. "In the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, then is finished the mystery of God, according to the good tidings which He declared to His servants the prophets."

But before the sounding of the seventh trumpet takes place, the writer introduces an episode, which perhaps has proved the most difficult part of the Book to understand. Its symbolism and local colouring are entirely different from what we find in the greater part of Revelation. And many modern scholars have adopted the theory that here

we have an extract or extracts from some old Jewish book, which the writer has introduced because of the aptness to his purpose of the teaching that is contained therein. This solution of the difficulty is rendered all the more likely, that there are other passages, for example the sealing of the tribes in the seventh chapter, which find their most natural explanation in the same way.

And when we come to enquire into the writer's purpose in quoting from the old book, we are struck with the aptness of the quotation as an introduction to the line of thought that is unfolded in the remaining chapters of Revelation. Two thoughts are prominent in the section.

1. Whatever course the history of the world may take, God's chosen people are safe. When the world seems to have invaded everything that God claims, when the powers of evil seem to be trampling all that is sacred, there is always a Holy Place marked off from their intrusion. Hidden in the secret of God's presence, His people are kept from the pride of men and from the strife of tongues. In the main we have here a repetition of the truth contained in the passage about the sealing of the tribes, but with this advance in the argument that the protection here promised is not

from the blind forces of Nature, but from the hostility of the world to all that is of God.

2. Nor would the second thought be less illuminating and less welcome to John's readers. They were God's witnesses to their time; and John presses home upon them what will always be the reception that the world gives to those who bring God's message. The truth that they utter the world will not receive, even though it comes authenticated with signs of power and Divinity. For it is an irritating truth, as a goad in the side. And men will be glad and congratulate one another when the world-power rids them of the sight of those who stir up their consciences to torture them. They who are God's messengers must expect rejection, persecution, death, at the world's hands. They must be prepared to accept all that hatred of God can inflict. But such a death is the open door to victory. God will vindicate His witnesses. He will honour them in the sight of their enemies. His judgment will fall on their persecutors, and others will be moved to a tardy and transient repentance. Such will be the course of all witnessing for God—rejection by the world, followed by God's vindication. They who will be honoured by God are those upon whom the world has done its worst. His witnesses

must tread the same pathway as "the Witness nobler still," who was crucified in the great city. It is evident that it is to prepare his readers for the unfolding of this truth in their own experience that John quotes the passage.

And now the way has been prepared for the sounding of the seventh trumpet. And the sounding of the seventh trumpet is said to introduce a Woe upon the earth. "The second Woe is past: behold, the third Woe cometh quickly." Now, when we go on to read in what that Woe consists, we wonder that such a name should be applied to it. "And the seventh angel sounded; and there followed great voices in heaven, and they said, The kingdom of the world is become the Kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ: and He shall reign for ever and ever." Can this be called a Woe to the earth? Is it not just what should be? Does it not announce the advent of Him whose right it is to reign? Does it not mean the overthrow of the usurper, Satan? Is not this what every Christian and every earnest heathen has been praying for from the beginning of time: "Thy Kingdom come"? A Kingdom of righteousness, instead of an anarchy of unrighteousness! That which wakes the gratitude and praises of heaven can surely never be accounted a Woe

to the earth. For, if earth has broken away from the service of God, the best thing that can happen to it is that it be brought back. Is it not the one hope for men, that one day the kingdom of the world will become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ? How, then, can it be called a Woe? But let us read on: "And the nations were wroth, and Thy wrath came, and the time of the dead to be judged, and the time to give their reward to Thy servants the prophets, and to the saints, and to them that fear Thy name, the small and the great; and to destroy them that destroy the earth." The cause of Christ will not gain an easy victory. The usurper will not retire without resistance. Not yet, after nearly two thousand years, do we see all things put under Christ's feet. And as we look back over those centuries and see the hardness of the conflict which the Kingdom of Christ has had to sustain, as we look in upon our own hearts and see the toughness of the struggle between right and wrong there, we can understand what the writer means when he says that the coming of the Kingdom will bring Woe to the earth; that the revelation of God is sweet to the mouth, but afterwards bitter. The ideal is sweet to contemplate. The hope of the triumph of Christ's Kingdom

is sweet. But the means by which that triumph can be brought to pass is unspeakably bitter. It is the greatest hardship that can come to a smiling, fertile land when two contending nations make it their battlefield. It means the destruction of the earth's productiveness, the cessation of settled industry, and the coming of a thousand undeserved hardships on the unhappy people. Incalculable good may lie at the far end of it. It may be a struggle necessary for the advancement of the liberty and moral life of the world. But the present must be a Woe. So for the world, so for the individual soul, where God and Satan contend for the mastery. The shining gates of the city beckon us on. But the way to it lies through the dark, rough, dreary valley.

But before entering on the task of unfolding the struggle, the writer heartens his readers by giving them the oft-repeated assurance that the struggle has no uncertain issue. "There was opened the temple of God that is in heaven; and there was seen in His temple the ark of His covenant." The ark of the covenant was the symbol that was carried about with the camp of Israel to remind them continually of the faithfulness of their covenant God. Whatever difficulties they met in the

way, whatever enemies they had to encounter, whatever disasters befell them, there was the pledge of God's faithfulness in their midst. They had only to lift their eyes to the ark of the covenant, resting beneath its cloud, to be reminded that God was with them. And so in this new pilgrimage the writer points to the ark of the new covenant, the symbol of God's faithfulness, the promise and pledge of the victory that is reserved for those that faint not in the battle of life. The temple of God has been opened in heaven. The secret of God has been disclosed to man. The heart of God has been revealed. And the ark of the new covenant is in our midst, for the encouragement of all those who lift their eyes to it. The writer does not say what it is. He does not need to do so, for the idea of it overshadows all his thinking. It is the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. And God has set it in the midst of the world, in the midst of human history; has elevated it on high, has overshadowed it with clouds of solemn glory, that men may find it easy to turn their eyes towards it in the hours of depression and weakness and apparent failure. And whenever we are inclined to doubt whether it is worth while struggling on, whether we are not labouring in vain and spending our

strength for nought, we may lift our eyes to the ark of the covenant, to the Cross of Christ, to the symbol of victory amid apparent failure, and find our hearts encouraged. God is pledged to Christ. "He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied." And therefore He is pledged to all who have linked their interests with Christ's. For all sinking hopes this is the remedy. The Cross is God's own pledge to men. He is faithful. He cannot deny Himself.

IX

THE DRAGON—THE SPIRIT OF EVIL

"And I heard a great voice in heaven, saying, Now is come the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of His Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accuseth them before our God day and night. And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb, and because of the word of their testimony; and they loved not their life even unto death. Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe for the earth and for the sea: because the devil is gone down unto you, having great wrath, knowing that he hath but a short time."—REV. xii. 10–12.

FOR the understanding of the Book of Revelation, we cannot keep too clearly before our mind its practical purpose. It was written to stimulate, to encourage, to strengthen, the persecuted Christians of Asia to endure and to overcome. It contained a message sent to them by their beloved teacher from Patmos. It was a trumpet-call to endurance. They were suffering, but their sufferings were not useless. By means of them God was giving victory to His Church.

And we have every reason to believe that John's message did meet their need. New courage came into their hearts, new power of endurance, new exultation of victory, as they read these stirring words. It proved a living book to them. And to those who can make use of it, it is a living book still. It is not a book that once had power, but is now only of antiquarian interest. It has for our age a message as real and helpful as it had for the Christians of the first century. Perhaps of all New Testament books it is the book for the age.

We have now come to a section of the Book which every student has found difficult, and some have counted hopeless. But with patient study, even this section, apparently so meaningless, will yield a meaning; even this passage, apparently so dry, will furnish water of refreshment to souls weary by reason of the way. Nay, we shall perhaps find here the very central message of the Book, the vision that explains the mystery of this present life.

The first point that is noticeable is the sudden and apparently arbitrary shifting of the scene between heaven and earth. We read that a great sign was seen in heaven, and as the writer goes on to describe it, it

becomes apparent that it is not a sign of earth. But the woman who is manifested in heaven flees into the wilderness; and where in heaven can a wilderness be found? Again, there is another sign in heaven, a great red dragon; and against the dragon war is carried on by the heavenly powers; and as the result of the war, the dragon is cast down to earth, which is henceforth the scene of his malignant operations. Plainly earth and heaven, in the mind of this writer, cannot be two places separated one from the other. The earth and the heaven of which this chapter speaks must be an earth and a heaven so closely linked together that a process begun in the one may be completed in the other. And this is one thought that John throughout the Book is trying to bring home to his readers. Earth and its struggles are not outside the interest of heaven. On the contrary, the spiritual world is behind and sustains all that takes place in history. Spiritual principles harden and consolidate into the events of time. The facts of history have their roots in the spiritual world. Earth is heaven become visible. It is the spiritual world hardened into concrete fact. Earth is an outlying province of the great Empire of God, throughout which His laws hold and

His writ runs. An event that takes place in heaven has its effects and issues on earth; and an act done upon earth has influence reaching even to the throne of God.

The next point that we notice, a point lying on the surface, is that the chapter gives the story of a warfare. Behind the veil that hangs between the seen and the unseen there is a conflict of invisible powers, and this conflict has an outcrop in history. Herein lies the encouragement which this vision was calculated to bring to the persecuted Christians. The veil is lifted. Behind the scenes there is a conflict going on between God and Satan; and here in front is the same conflict between God's servants and Satan's, breaking into history and manifested as events in time. But, whether in the spiritual world or in the earthly, the conflict is one. The issues are the same. Earth is a corner of the battlefield on which God and Satan contend. The conflict between the persecuted and the persecutor is all that we can see, but it is not all that is. Two spiritual powers are behind it. And thus would John encourage the fainting spirits of his disciples. The sufferings that they were enduring were a phase of the conflict that is continually going on between these spiritual

forces. Man has been drawn into it. He could not help being drawn into it. And therefore human life has a significance beyond itself. Mankind is an isolated detachment in this great battle, which may seem to stand alone, and to have no connection with the general fighting. But in the eye of God, who has placed it where it is, its operations may have an important bearing on the battle as a whole. It may be holding some strategic position that it is important to hold. And the knowledge that its faithfulness is of such moment will help it to endure till the victory is won. Such is the message of the chapter. "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers."

Let us now consider the symbolism of the chapter more closely.

I. *The Combatants.*—"And a great sign was seen in heaven; a woman arrayed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars; and she was with child: and she crieth out, travailing in birth, and in pain to be delivered. . . . And she was delivered of a son, a man child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron." Most commentators have seen in the woman the Church of God. But they have differed from one another as to whether the

Jewish Church or the Christian Church is meant. We do not need to decide the point, or even to limit the reference to any one section of the Church of God, which has been in all ages and among every people. It is not the woman that is the important point, but the birth. That the world might be redeemed, something new had to be born into it. There was no redeeming power within itself. Only by a new introduction could redemption be effected. Consider how this fits into the scheme of the book as we have seen it. Contemporary life was corrupt. Destructive forces were everywhere at work in the world. The Empire was unable to cope with them. There seemed no outlook except that all things must go down in ruin. And yet the world was to be redeemed. The voice had been heard in heaven, "The kingdom of the world is become the Kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ." How was God to bring about the transformation? Must He sweep the world clear of the Roman Empire? Must He first clear a stage on which He may then bring something new? Must He wipe out Roman civilisation? That is not the way in which God works. He does not work so in Nature. He does not first clear the forest, that He may have room

to plant new trees. He drops the seeds on the ground; and they sprout and grow towards maturity side by side with and under the shadow of the trees, and at length displace them, when these grow too old to maintain the competition. So does God act in history. He did not sweep Canaan clean of its inhabitants before He brought Israel in to inhabit it. He brought Israel in among the Canaanites, that by conflict with them they might become strong, and gain a footing in the land. So does He act in the individual life. He does not first cleanse the heart of its demon inhabitants, that the virtues may find a house swept and garnished and already fit for their abode. The heart's best guests have to take the heart as they find it, and turn out the demon inhabitants, and sweep and garnish it for themselves. God kindles the flame of grace in the heart, and it sends its rays out to overcome the darkness, and to penetrate into every corner and dislodge the shadows. And that is what God did with the world. He did not sweep the corruption away and make a clear space for the new Kingdom. He brought in the new Kingdom, weak and feeble as a new-born child, which to all appearance might easily be crushed, to contest the homage of man-

kind with the Enemy of God that was in the world.

And over against this saving power born into the world, there is the other candidate for the homage of mankind, described as a great red dragon, full of fury, full of cruelty, blood-red, seeking to crush the new-born child, ready to devour it. As Herod lay in wait for the life of the young Child Jesus, so did Satan lie in wait for the son of the woman to destroy it.

But the dragon fails to devour the new-born child. "Her child was caught up unto God, and unto His throne." Christianity is Christ, and Christ is Christianity. Hence the seer can find symbols in the incidents of Christ's life to describe the fortunes of Christianity. "Born and caught up." Commentators have sometimes asked, "Why is it that only two events in the earthly life of our Lord are mentioned, His birth and His ascension?" But the phrase covers more than these two events. John had already seen the throne and its Occupant. "And I saw in the midst of the throne a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain." It is not the ascension merely that is covered by the phrase, "caught up unto God, and unto His throne." All that paved the way for the ascension, the sufferings and humiliation by which Christ passed to the

throne of the universe, the self-abasement that won for Him the "Name that is above every name," are included in the phrase. Through the Cross He was caught up unto the throne. By the way of sorrow He reached the highest glory. And what the seer here sees is the enthronement of Christ and all that Christ stands for. Satan is foiled. The revelation of God that is made through Christ is acknowledged to be sovereign. Love is enthroned, sacrifice is enthroned, when Christ is enthroned. And Satan cannot reach high enough to devour the child.

II. *The Conflict.* — "There was war in heaven: Michael and his angels going forth to war with the dragon; and the dragon warred and his angels; and they prevailed not, neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast down, the old serpent, he that is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world; he was cast down to the earth, and his angels were cast down with him." Jewish legend speaks of a conflict that took place in heaven, when Satan lifted himself up in rebellion against God, trying to hurl Him from His throne. Milton makes use of this story in *Paradise Lost*, and pictures how Satan and his defeated hosts were cast into the hell that had been pre-

pared for them. And John here takes the legend and uses it as a parable of the continual defeat that Satan suffers at the hand of Christ. It has sometimes been asked, "When did this war take place?" It is always taking place. Satan, and all that he stands for, suffers continual defeat. Christ, and all that He stands for, is ever on the throne in heaven. Satan is always cast down to the earth, and his place is not found in heaven. The accuser of the brethren seeks to keep God separated from man, and man alienated from God. He is the Devil, Satan, the calumniator, the slanderer of man to God. And the other description of him, "the deceiver of the whole world," sets forth the complementary side of his nature and his activity. He that accuses man to God turns to man and tries to deceive him with regard to God. He stands for all that tries to keep God and man apart. But he suffers defeat in heaven. There he has no place. He cannot accuse man to God with any hope of success. Nor can he deceive heaven's inhabitants with regard to Him whose face they behold. Whatever clouds the face of God from man has no place among them. Satan suffers continual defeat.

And the ground of this victory is celebrated in the song of praise that rises in great volume

in heaven: "They overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb, and because of the word of their testimony." Because Christ died, because God has revealed Himself, because the true attitude of God to man has been manifested, because the Lamb that was slain is seated on the throne of glory, they who have lived and died in the faith of these things are made conquerors. This is the message that John sent to the harassed Christians of Asia and to us. Satan, and all he stands for, suffers defeat. His deceits have been exposed. No place is found for him in heaven. His calumnies have no voice there. His lies have no audience there. Nothing enters there to mar the unclouded faith of God's children, the faith that rests on the blood of the Lamb and the testimony of His grace.

Surely this is a truth worth knowing, that there is a place, that there is a state, into which no doubts of God can ever come, across whose sky no clouds can ever pass to hide the Divine radiance; where God's saints dwell for ever in the light of His presence. And the thought, too, that this place is not inaccessible to us; that men of like passions with ourselves are continually passing from this world of doubt and shadow into it; that even upon earth

there is a land of Beulah for those who have reached the borders of heaven; that even we can reach it; that we reach it as we are made white in the blood of the Lamb, as we yield ourselves to the testimony of the gospel, and as in the battle of life we remain steadfast for Christ, loving not our lives unto the death—this is a thought to encourage our heart and nerve our arm.

III. This is how matters stand in heaven, in the spiritual world behind the veil. Evil with its alienating influence has no place there. But these Christians to whom John was writing were not in heaven. They were upon the earth, crushed under the persecutor. We too are upon the earth, face to face with doubts and sin and the hoary strongholds of evil. And it is for earth that comfort and strength are needed. If there is such serenity in heaven, why not on earth too, since earth is God's? If evil has no place in heaven, why has it place among men? Why is Satan cast down upon the earth, and not sent straight to hell? It is because on earth he can find minds that he can deceive, hearts that he can pervert, wills that he can lead astray. Man can be tempted of evil. That is why John speaks of this phase of history as a Woe to the earth. Man endures all the misery of a

distracted and divided nature. He is not wholly good, neither is he wholly evil. And his soul is the battlefield where good and evil continually strive for the mastery.

But the good is ever victorious. Satan knows that his time is short. And this explains the virulence of his wrath against all that is of Christ upon the earth. He dies hard. As the evil spirit that Christ was casting out tare his victim through sheer hatred of God, so Satan's malignity makes him do all the mischief that he can before succumbing. That was the meaning of the fierceness of the persecution to which the Christians were being subjected. It was Satan's last convulsive tightening of his grasp upon those whom God was already forcing him to let go. It was his supreme effort. And wherever we find evil fierce and virulent, it is an evidence of the same fact. Satan is dying, but he is dying hard.

And what can he do? He can still deceive those who are willing to listen to him. He can persecute those who refuse obedience to him. He is ever the enemy of all righteousness.

And yet, it is comparatively little that he can do. He can send his streams of persecution after God's servants. He can try to overwhelm

them. But the earth helps them and swallows up his malignity. All that he can do is exhausted on what is mortal of them. The body can be imprisoned, but the soul cannot be reached. The physical life can be destroyed, but the soul's life is hid with Christ in God. What in the Christian is perishable and of the earth licks up the streams of persecution and exhausts them. But Satan cannot come to the place prepared by God, the secret of His presence, to touch the immortal part.

All men are taking sides in this great conflict. They stand for Satan, for evil; or they stand for Christ, for righteousness. And sometimes it may seem more profitable to take the wages of Satan than to endure the hardness of the soldier of Christ. But look at the matter as it is presented in this vision. Satan has no place and no field save in this world. Those who are with Satan have the whole universe against them. They have no future. And even here upon earth, Satan is fighting at bay, putting forth the strength of his malignant nature, but with no hope of turning the eternal defeat into a victory. "Knowing that he has but a short time," he does all the mischief he can. That is the inner meaning of sin. Sinners are trying to buttress a power that is already falling to

destruction. Whereas those who stand for Christ are on the side of that which is eternal and has eternal promise. Though here in history the little human battalion is enduring the murderous fire of defeated rage, their victory is already assured. The eye of the great Captain of their salvation is upon them. They shall not fail to share in the final triumph, to share in it all the more gloriously for the hard fight that they are sustaining now. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life."

X

THE BEASTS—THE TWOFOLD TYRANNY

"Here is the patience and the faith of the saints."—
REV. xiii. 10.

To stir up the saints of Asia to patience and faith is the aim of the writer of Revelation. And the words which we have chosen as our text indicate that he has now reached the point in his argument which touches their case most closely. He has been speaking of the great struggle between God and Satan, the eternal opposition between good and evil. But this struggle has its earthly counterpart. History is the outcrop of the spiritual. And it is by unflinchingly carrying on the struggle as it emerges on the field of history that the saints can manifest their patience and faith. Hitherto he has been dealing with the spiritual forces behind the veil. But in this chapter the conflict emerges in the daily life of the Christians of his time.

In expounding the symbolism of this chapter, we shall ask, (1) what it means with reference to those to whom John was writing, and (2) what it means with reference to ourselves.

I. What were the elements of contemporary life that constituted the conflict of those first-century Christians? Let us recall the main points in the twelfth chapter. Satan has no place in heaven. He cannot make his accusations of the brethren before God. He cannot delude the inhabitants of heaven with regard to God. But he has power on earth, because there he can find minds which he can subvert and deceive and lead astray. In that men and women can do right and may yet be tempted to do wrong, in that they can obey God and may yet be drawn aside from their allegiance, Satan finds his opportunity. And he seizes the opportunity by allying himself with some human organisation, which he makes the tool for carrying out his evil purpose. It is this alliance that is described in the thirteenth chapter.

"And he stood upon the sand of the sea." This is the reading of the Revised Version, and, taken thus, the verse serves to connect the twelfth chapter with the thirteenth. The dragon waits for the arising of the earthly

counterpart of himself, through which he can bring his activity to bear upon men.

"And I saw a beast coming up out of the sea." It is a fit instrument for the dragon, which he can inspire with his own antagonism to God. There are details in the picture of the beast the meaning of which commentators are not agreed upon, and into which we need not enter. Suffice it to say that the beast represents the pagan and persecuting Roman Empire. It was an organisation foreign to Asia, coming from the West, and therefore spoken of as arising out of the sea.

The character of this Empire is set forth in two outstanding features—its brutal form, and its blasphemy.

1. *It is represented as a beast, with all a beast's strength and ferocity and cruelty.* Its power was brute force, the blending of massive strength with feline dexterity. In his description the writer has doubtless in his mind Daniel's vision of the four kingdoms, each of which is characterised by a single animal. But this Empire combines in itself all the characteristics of all the kingdoms that went before it. Subtlety, cruelty, strength, all the brute forces of the world, are gathered into one huge, all-powerful organisation. There were worthier features in the Roman Empire,

but here they are lost sight of in the face of its monstrous power. The Empire as John saw and represented it was a vast, persecuting, crushing, destroying force, which there was no escaping and no resisting. It was an engine of unbreakable strength and remorseless cruelty. And it was in the hand of Satan to work his will.

It does not need a great effort of the imagination to enable us to picture what it must have meant for individuals, or a company of individuals, to find themselves in opposition to this powerful engine of destruction. What could they expect but to be crushed under it? In Watts' picture, "The Minotaur," a representation of brute force that might stand for the Roman Empire, there is a poor little bird upon which the brute has simply laid his paw. The mere weight of the paw has crushed the life out of it. So the mere weight of Rome was sufficient to crush any one who put himself in its way. And thus it was a fit instrument to carry out the rage of Satan against Christ's followers.

2. *And the Empire embodied the opposition of evil to God in the blasphemy that it uttered.* It had upon its heads names of blasphemy. It put forward claims that, in the eyes of every Christian, were blasphemy

against God. Gratitude for a measure of good government had led the provinces to speak of the Empire and the Emperor in the extravagant language of adoration, and soon the extravagance had been turned into a sober claim. The Emperor claimed to be divine. Temples and altars were erected, and feasts instituted in his honour; and participation in these idolatrous rites became the mark of loyalty. The claim to divine honours became part of the regular imperial policy. It was recognised that only one thing, religion, could bind the diverse nations and races that made up the Empire into a unity. These had nothing in common save the homage that they could be made to feel towards the Empire; and to strengthen and deepen that homage into reverent worship became the imperial policy. Is this not worthy of our attention at the present time? We too are face to face with the problem of binding into one an Empire, composed of men of many races and languages and ways of thinking about God. Proposals of various kinds are put forward with the view of accomplishing this object. Does it not seem as if these old Romans, nearly two thousand years ago, came nearer to a solution of the problem than many at the present day? They felt that nothing could

bind the Empire into one, save what would appeal to the deepest that is in man, to his reverence and devotion and mysterious longing after God. If they had only been able to furnish a divinity that could appeal to man's reverence, they might have solved the problem completely. There was a subject of the Empire who could have helped them to a solution — the Apostle Paul. He, as Professor Ramsay has shewn, was not only a missionary, but a great constructive statesman. He made it his work to carry the religion of Jesus to the great cities of the Roman world. But the Empire did not rise to Paul's idea. Yet let us take notice of the truth that it did reach and try to put in force, that nothing can bind an Empire together except what moves men to their depths and evokes their reverence and worship. And let us take the further step of asserting that the religion of Jesus is the only possible bond for this Empire of ours.

The claim to divine honours was made by the Empire, and made persistently and stubbornly. And it was a claim that no follower of Jesus could admit. It was blasphemy in his sight. The world had little difficulty in acknowledging the claim and in offering the worship demanded. Throughout

this chapter we hear the echoes of men's thoughts regarding Rome: "Who is like unto the beast? and who is able to war with him?" But the followers of the Lamb, they whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, could not admit the claim, nor do anything to countenance it: all they could do was to take the consequences of their refusal. It was a terrible situation to be in. Driven by their consciences, impelled by their loyalty to Christ, to take up a position of opposition to a power that was determined to have its way, and that was prepared to crush them to get it, their condition seemed hopeless. How clearly does the writer see it and state it! There is no way of escape. He that is appointed for captivity will have to go into captivity; and he that has been appointed to be slain with the sword will have to submit to the sword. Passive resistance was the only way open to them. In bearing whatever the world could inflict rather than deny God, and in looking for the ultimate victory of the Church of Christ, lay the patience and the faith of the saints.

But not yet has the writer laid bare the full tragedy of their situation. There is a second beast, not foreign, rising out of the sea, but native, rising out of the earth, which executes

all the authority of the first beast in his sight. It is the executive of the first beast, bringing his claims and his power into actual contact with the lives of men. This second beast has been a difficulty with interpreters, but there can hardly be any doubt that Professor Ramsay has pointed out the right interpretation. If the first beast is the Empire, the second is the native council of the Province of Asia, the chief of whose functions was perhaps the care of the imperial worship. It was through the native council of the Province that the ferocity and cruelty of the Empire were brought to bear on those who refused to listen to her blasphemous claims.

This section that we have reached is perhaps one of the most interesting of the whole Book, and one of the most important bits of ancient literature from the historical point of view. For we have in it a first-hand authority as to the social and religious life of Asia at the time when the book was written. It is a window through which we can look into its great cities and see what was going on there, what the Government did to enforce its will, what the Christians had to endure, and how hard it was for them to bear up under the pressure of persecution. As we read these verses, we feel that we are in close contact with life. They

speak of what men actually saw, of the setting up of objects of worship, of signs and wonders that were apparently done before their eyes, of the conditions of buying and selling, and of sufferings for Christ's sake. And is not the conviction borne in upon us as we read, what a pressing temptation to forsake Christ that life must have been for His followers? We shall look at some of the elements of that temptation, remembering that these Christians had not nearly two thousand years of Christianity behind them, with their clear witness to its power and beneficence. They had just come out of paganism, and many of the prejudices and habits of thought of paganism still clung to them. And yet I think that their faithfulness and steadfastness ought to put us to shame, who live in so much easier circumstances, and yet are ready to succumb before the smallest trial of our faith.

1. The native council was not above trying to advance the imperial religion by spurious miracles, and all the trickery by which it is possible for unscrupulous men to deceive the ignorant and the credulous. This chapter tells of fire being made to come down out of heaven in the sight of men, and of the image of the beast being made to speak in the ears of the people—a common trick in

temples. These signs were done in the sight of the beast, that is, in the presence and with the approval of the imperial officers. The native priests of the imperial temples and the officers of the Government, perhaps under the influence of some clever, unscrupulous man, in a later chapter called the false prophet, stuck at nothing, and left no trick unused that might deceive the people into acknowledging the claims of the Empire. Now, we can imagine what a strain these seeming miracles would put upon the fidelity of the Christians. They could not explain and expose them. They could not deny what they saw with their eyes and heard with their ears. Their cast of mind would incline them to believe rather than to doubt, for Asia Minor was notorious for its tendency to superstition. And it would be difficult for them to resist the testimony of these apparent miracles, that the religion they were refusing to acknowledge was divine.

2. A second element in the temptation to forsake Christ was active and severe persecution. Even religious sanction was invoked for persecution. The oracles demanded the death of all who refused to listen to their voice. It caused "that as many as should not worship the image of the beast should

be killed." Participation in the worship was made the test of loyalty. The Christians were not condemned for crimes. Merely as Christians, they were regarded as rebels and punished as such. The proof of a man's loyalty to the State was his willingness to pay homage to the statue of the Emperor. The proof of his disloyalty was his refusal. We have a letter of Pliny when governor of Bithynia, written to the Emperor Trajan at a somewhat later date than that of Revelation, and describing his method with Christians. "As for those who said they neither were nor ever had been Christians, I thought it right to let them go, since they recited a prayer to the gods at my dictation, made supplication with incense and wine to your statue, which I had ordered to be brought into court for the purpose, together with the images of the gods, and, moreover, cursed Christ, any one of which things not one of those who are really Christians can be made to do." That was the procedure with those who denied that they were Christians. But if one confessed to being a Christian, nothing remained but to pass sentence upon him. Now, think of one of the citizens of Ephesus or Pergamum, brought before the governor's court on the charge of being a Christian.

The procedure would be swift and summary. "Are you a Christian?" he would be asked. He knew that if he answered "Yes," nothing stood between him and sentence of death. How great would be the temptation at that moment to choose life rather than death, to conform to the governor's requirements, and to purchase life by renouncing Christ! Many a timid Christian must have been sorely tempted to yield.

3. A third element in the temptation to forsake Christ was the extreme difficulty of remaining a hidden Christian. Often in times of persecution a Christian has remained undisturbed simply because he has kept quiet, and has not obtruded himself and his profession upon the attention of men. But it must have been well-nigh impossible for the Christians of Asia to remain in obscurity, for the native council laid upon every one the responsibility of making his adherence to the religion of the Empire indubitable. "The beast causeth all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free and the bond, that there be given them a mark on their right hand, or upon their forehead." It was not enough that they should not be pronounced Christians; they must be avowed pagans. We do not know

with certainty what the mark of the beast was. Some think that it refers to certificates of loyalty, which were issued by the Government, and, of course, had to be applied for. But this much seems certain, that upon every one was laid the responsibility of making it perfectly clear that he was loyal to the imperial religion, and thus any attempt to remain in obscurity would only bring suspicion upon one, and would result in his having to clear himself before the court. We can see, then, how strong would be the temptation for a timid Christian to put an end to continual trouble and anxiety by renouncing the faith.

4. Still another element of the temptation was the disabilities that Christianity involved, and the hindrances that it put in the way of men's engaging in the ordinary occupations of life. No one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, even the number of the beast or the number of his name. Some thirty years ago a new word, "boycott," was introduced into the English language. But it was a new name for a very old thing. Perhaps we have an example of it here. If any one was suspect, loyal citizens would have nothing to do with him, and he was left without the means of subsistence. Or

perhaps the verse refers to what is abundantly confirmed in other places, that so deeply was religion inwoven into the social life of the time that it was impossible for any one to be a citizen without his having to perform some act that a Christian could not regard as other than idolatrous. Christianity felt this difficulty from the first. Religion was so mixed up with every department of life that to be a Christian meant voluntarily to ostracise oneself from city, social, and even family life.

From this chapter, then, we learn that the Christians of Asia were in the meshes of a net from which there was no escape. The provincial council brought all kinds of influences—physical, intellectual, social—to bear upon them. The wonder is that under such a system it was possible for one to be a Christian and survive. Yet it was under this all-pervading, unsleeping, unwearying cruelty and persecution that John called upon his readers to endure and have faith. He saw no way open to them save endurance, and through endurance victory. "Here is the patience and the faith of the saints."

II. But this chapter has lessons for the Christians of every age. The spirit of evil will always find some organisation with which

to ally itself, in order to bring its opposition to God into contact with human life. Its allies are varied. It will not always find a Roman Empire, with world-wide power and determined cruelty and blasphemous pretensions. But it may take possession of a man, blinded by ambition to all human rights, and willing to wade through a river of blood if only a throne gleam on the farther side. It may inspire a Church false to the commonest spiritual and moral truths, yet making claim to speak for God. It may become the spirit of an age, presenting as truth an atheistical or materialistic philosophy, that counts life a thing of a few years on earth, and morality an affectation, and God a dream. It will always find some power, some organisation, some human activity, to enter into and control. If it does not find one, it will find another.

With what is this spirit allying itself to-day in its endeavour to resist the coming of the Kingdom of Christ? This is simply to ask, "What are the anti-Christian forces and influences of our time?" To this question some will give one answer, some another. But we can all see one point at which the battle is being joined between the forces of Christ and the allies of Satan. We can all see one point where our conscience, our profession,

our loyalty to Christ, demands that we take our stand against evil. At this point we must stand. Here, at the point where evil assails us, is the patience and the faith of the saints for us. At this point we must endure. We are called upon to have faith that, however impotent against evil the power of Christ may seem, the victory of righteousness is sure. The resistance that sin offers to God is hopeless and futile. Would that we could read this chapter with imagination vivid enough to enable us to do justice to the courage of those Christians of Asia! It would be like iron in the blood. It would make us ashamed of our feebleness and cowardice where the cause of Christ is concerned. It is a summons to earnestness, to endurance, to faith. And now as then, it contains the promise of ultimate victory.

XI

"THEY WHICH FOLLOW THE LAMB"

"These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth."—Rev. xiv. 4.

We have only to read the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters with some care to see that there is a close and intentional connection between them. They are constructed on the same lines. They are parallel in plan. Look at some of the points of resemblance. "I saw a beast coming up out of the sea." "I saw the Lamb standing on the Mount Zion." "The whole earth wondered after the beast." With the Lamb were a hundred and forty and four thousand. All the followers of the beast had his name written on their right hands, or on their foreheads. The hundred and forty and four thousand had the name of the Lamb and the name of His Father written on their foreheads. The worshippers of the beast

celebrated his greatness in a hymn of praise: "Who is like unto the beast? and who is able to war with him?" And over against this earthly song there is a heavenly: "And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and the voice which I heard was as the voice of harpers harping with their harps: and they sing as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four living creatures and the elders: and no man could learn the song save the hundred and forty and four thousand, even they that had been purchased out of the earth." The points of contact are too many and too striking not to be deliberate. We feel that, in the fourteenth chapter, the writer is drawing a companion picture to that in the thirteenth. He sets the two classes, the followers of the beast and the followers of the Lamb, in strong and vivid contrast. What his purpose in doing so is we shall endeavour to learn.

But first let us look at the picture that he draws of the followers of the Lamb. Three points in that picture invite notice.

1. They are with the Lamb. This does not mean merely that they are in the same place.[1] It has a far richer meaning than that.

[1] It does not denote locality.

The nearness of His followers to the Lamb is the nearness of will and desire. They are *with* the Lamb. His will is their will. His life is their life. They have reached the place they occupy by the same road as the Lamb Himself. They are the knights around His person, and they are all stamped with the likeness of the King. They stand for all that the Lamb stands for—suffering, victory, sovereignty; just as the followers of the beast bear the mark of the beast, and stand for all that he represents—ferocity, cruelty, brute force.

2. This likeness is further brought out by the second point in the picture, that the followers of the Lamb have His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads. And this stamping with the name has a deep meaning in the New Testament. There "name" never means merely a distinguishing word, but connotes a character. The name of God is the character of God. And so, in the contrasted pictures, we have the truth suggested, that the followers of the beast shall grow liker and liker to the beast. They shall grow more and more brutal. Less and less shall they have self-government and self-control; more and more shall they become the victims of fierce gusts of passion, which, Dante tells us, are the instruments by which

those who have not sought self-control here will be punished in the other world. But the followers of the Lamb shall grow liker and liker to the Lamb, in all his Divine, Lamb-like features, in meekness and gentleness, in sacrifice and saving power, in victory and sovereignty.

3. A third feature of the picture is the occupation of the followers of the Lamb. They are raising to God a triumphant song of praise. They are as harpers harping with their harps. I do not suppose that any one will understand this literally, any more than other figures of this mystic book. To think of the life of heaven as a life of idleness, of selfishness, but little removed from the delights of the Mohammedan Paradise, is to misunderstand what the New Testament says regarding it. We must get at the heart of the symbolism. Now, it is impossible to say what outward form of life shall be the lot of beings such as we hope to be, what shall be our occupations, what surprises of opportunity we shall meet with, what shall engage our powers and activities, what shall constitute our interests; but this we can say, that the heavenly life shall be one of unspeakable joy and exultation and buoyant service—that, whatever form it takes, it shall be a life that is a song

of praise rising continually to God and to the Lamb, a song the mode of which is being determined by the life that each one is living here below. Each shall sing a new song, his own song, which no other can learn to sing, because it corresponds to the experience that each individual has of the mercy and loving-kindness of God.

These, then, are the outstanding features of the heavenly life—likeness to Christ, and praise to God and to the Lamb.

Now, why does the writer bring in this companion picture in contrast to that of the followers of the beast? What place does it hold in his argument? The thirteenth chapter sets forth the hardness of the lot of the Christians to whom the Book was written. They were living in the Roman Empire, an Empire that put forth blasphemous claims, and was prepared to go all lengths to enforce them. They were living immediately under the unsleeping eye of the provincial council, which offered every inducement, and employed every form of compulsion, to promote the idolatrous worship of the Emperor. Such were the outward circumstances. On the other hand, conscience and the constraining sense of obligation to Christ held them back from acknowledging this impious claim. Their

condition was like that of the grain between the upper and the nether millstones. They were in the grip of a power that there was no resisting. Only one honourable course was open to them, to endure, to suffer, to take whatever the world offered them, and to leave the result with God. And that is the course that their beloved and revered teacher urges them to take. It was hard to put themselves deliberately in the way of that pitiless, destroying machine. But it was the highest way. It was the way that was worthy of the followers of the Lamb. They must not seek relief by unfaithfulness to Christ. If suffering was to be their lot (and the writer knew full well that nothing else was before them), then he urges them to accept it resolutely and joyfully. It is the hardness of the situation that gives room for the exercise of the patience and faith of the saints.

But it is not enough merely to call upon them to endure. The writer brings before them every consideration, every inducement, every stimulus, to endure. And this is the significance of this lofty vision. He has pictured the pride, the insolence, the cruelty, of the beast and his followers. He has pictured the lot of the followers of Christ under the tyranny of the beast; but that is not the only aspect in

which their position can be regarded. They are with the Lamb, having His name and the name of God on their foreheads, and having the song of praise to Him on their tongues. In all the sufferings that they have to endure at the hands of men they are treading the same way that Christ trod before them, and, even in pain and death, they are the victors as He was. How their hearts would leap at the thought of the eminence on which their hard lot placed them!

We can see how skilfully compacted is the argument of the book to fulfil the purpose for which it was intended. Every section of it is subordinated to the single aim of giving encouragement and strength. The writer keeps that purpose steadily before him. But he gives encouragement on the highest level. They must take all that the world gives, in the faith that it is unconsciously giving them, not suffering merely, but something great and grand beyond their power to imagine, a place among those who follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.

That this is the aim of this passage is, I think, borne out by the fourth and fifth verses. These verses give, as it were, a descriptive title to the picture. The painter writes underneath it its name and meaning: "These are

they which follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth."

Most commentators have taken the first part of the fourth verse more or less literally, interpreting it as setting forth the praise of asceticism and celibacy, which were not long in making their appearance in the Church, and the abuse of which even the writers of the New Testament had to combat. But the words present no difficulty if we remember what constituted the temptation that beset those to whom John was writing, and to what an extent his thinking and imagery and symbolism were influenced by the prophets. The symbol is a common one in the Old Testament to denote the turning aside after idols and the abominations of heathen worship. And in subsequent chapters in this book it is employed to represent the commercial and religious relations which the various nations of the earth held with the imperial city. The great defilement that the writer has in view is nothing else than that to which the Christians were so laid open, the temptation to purchase relief from the severity of the pressure that lay upon them by compromise, by yielding some little way to the demands of the Government. And they who are with the Lamb are those that come through the great temptation

with their garments undefiled. But *only* those who have kept their garments clean can have this place and honour. The companions-in-arms of the King must be above reproach. "They are without blemish."

It has been said over and over again that these persecuted Christians could do nothing but endure. But this has to be supplemented by the question, After all, was not endurance the most effective thing that could be done? Was it not the very best way of meeting opposition? Was not endurance of persecution the thing most calculated to impress the world? Men saw the wonderful sight of a small sect of Christians, against whom the State was putting forth its utmost power,—the power that had brought great nations to its feet,—braving all the cruelties that it could inflict rather than submit to its will. It saw them willing to face torture and death rather than deny Christ. Old men and young maidens were offered their life at what the onlookers would count an easy price. They were required only to throw a few grains of incense on the sacrificial fire. But they refused to accept this deliverance. What did it all mean? the bystanders would ask. What was the secret of this endurance, this devotion, this faith? Wherein lay the source of the

hidden strength that gave them courage to face death, not only without fear, but joyfully and triumphantly? And when that question was forced upon men's minds by the patient endurance of a proscribed sect, and kept demanding an answer, the triumph of the Church was sure. It was not mainly the preaching of the Church that changed the face of the world; nor the purity of the lives of its adherents, for slander accused them of the most abominable crimes, and the times were credulous. The *endurance* of the Christians so took hold of the imagination of the world that in a comparatively short time the Empire, which had been a blasphemer and a persecutor, obtained mercy.

And has not this a bearing on our own time? At the close of last lecture we saw how evil will always find some earthly organisation to be its instrument, and how this Satan-inspired power will always be the enemy of the Church of Christ. Whatever form the struggle that we have to maintain against this enemy may take, there will always be the temptation to give it up. There are times when the struggle against evil will seem hopeless and unavailing. Christ still has to summon us to endurance and courage in His cause.

And, to induce faith, it is often necessary to paint on the curtain of the imagination the victory that is coming, the day that the heart leaps to contemplate, which we sometimes see afar off, but which we shall never share in. We need to keep the vision of the new heaven and the new earth before us if our hearts are not to fail.

But we have a more powerful stimulus still in this thought, that to be patient and faithful gives us, even now, a place by the side of the Lamb and among those that follow Him whithersoever He goeth. The full complement of the followers of the Lamb is not yet made up. The hundred and forty and four thousand are not yet complete. Every year has its harvest, and every harvest has its first-fruits. Every movement in the history of mankind that makes for righteousness is a cycle that has its sowing-time and its reaping-time; and the first-fruits to God are its martyrs, who stand by it in the day of small things, who endure calumny and obloquy and loss and persecution on its behalf, who are not afraid to stake their all upon it when its prospects are not encouraging. It is these that make up the hundred and forty and four thousand. And surely the thought of belonging to that company is enough to encourage.

The strongest inducement to faithfulness is not the victory that we can hope to see within our lifetime, not even the larger victory that we can never hope to see, but which faith tells us is coming ; but the simple fact that the life of faithful endurance, the refusal to compromise with sin, the steady and consistent following of Christ here on earth, and the cheerful acceptance of all the consequences that faithfulness may bring upon us, will give us a place by the side of the Lamb, and among His followers : so that our song of praise to God will be the song of those who have suffered and striven and overcome, which angels can never sing, which the saints whose conflict has been light can never sing, which they only who, in the midst of sore trial and great tribulation, have kept themselves free from the world's impurity and compromise, from all trafficking with its falsity and deceit, can learn and sing.

XII

VISIONS OF HOPE AND FEAR

"And I heard a voice from heaven saying, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; for their works follow with them."—REV. xiv. 13.

WE have seen the forces and powers of evil take the field against God. The dragon, the spirit of evil, gives his power unto the beast, the Roman Empire; and the Empire, both by itself and its subordinates, executes that power. It strives to suppress the name of Jesus. It persecutes all who bear that name. But victory is assured to the followers of the Lamb; and it is upon the consideration of that victory that the Book now enters. This chapter contains what may at first sight seem to be a number of disconnected visions, whose place in the scheme of the Book is not very clear. But a little thought will enable us to make out what that place is, and how these visions are related to what precedes and what follows.

The victory of the Lamb over the beast,

the victory of the followers of the Lamb over the worshippers of the beast, is twofold. The first aspect of it was dealt with in last lecture. The followers of the Lamb are the victors, just *because* they are the followers of the Lamb. They have been faithful to the noblest, and the noblest is ever the highest. Measured by the eternal standards, those that resist evil and suffer for their resistance are above those that succumb to evil and in their hatred persecute the saints of God. And nothing can ever reverse that position. The followers of the Lamb are with the Lamb. Nothing higher can ever be said regarding them, for self-sacrifice is sovereign.

And there are times when this thought comes with great power of comfort, just such times as these Christians were passing through. Might was enthroned, yet right was intrinsically nobler. The worshippers of the beast had the power in their hands, but the followers of the Lamb had the higher life. Mere power is never higher than righteousness. Suffering in a good cause is intrinsically nobler than triumphing in a bad. To be a follower of the Lamb is better than to be a worshipper of the beast. This is a source of strength from which even yet we need to draw sometimes. When the cause on whose behalf we have

taken our stand seems hopelessly beaten, and no glimmer of light shines through the impenetrable dark; when it is at its lowest ebb, and the opposing evil raises its head triumphant, we are driven back from any encouragement that is to be got from hope of success upon the justice, the intrinsic nobleness, the moral worth of the cause itself. When persecution raged in Scotland, there were not a few who felt that it was better to be on the hills and moors, and in dens and caves of the earth, with God, than to be in possession of such security and honour as were to be obtained by being false to Him; better to be standing in front of the levelled muskets of dragoons than to be the proud officer on whose word hung death. "What think ye of your husband now, my woman?" Graham of Claverhouse is said to have asked the wife of John Brown of Priesthill, as she was setting in order the mangled remains of her husband, who had been shot before her eyes. "I thought ever much good of him," was the reply, "and as much now as ever." Those who can take their stand, not upon accidental considerations of success or failure, but upon essential qualities of righteousness, have a sure position. They stand on the level of all great deeds, of all noble times.

It is well for the followers of Christ to try to sometimes reach this lofty height, to take their stand on the simple rightness of their cause; not to bargain with God for success, but to say simply, "I am with Thee." For even if there be no God and no future life, if it be possible for us to think that evil may be always triumphant, and good always suffering and persecuted and defeated, "still it is better to be generous than selfish, better to be chaste than licentious, better to be true than false, better to be brave than to be a coward."

This is perhaps the highest ground of appeal for faithfulness that can be set before Christ's followers, but it is not the only one. There is another which is taken up in the fourteenth chapter, and carried on through the rest of the book.

If it is true that the Christ-life appeals to men by its intrinsic worth, and apart from any hopes of success that may attend it, it is not less true that it appeals to us by the assurance of future victory. The darkest night is not without a glimmer of the dawn. Nay, beyond the present, it is all light. Surely history is too full of the proof of this for it to be doubted for a minute. If evil is enthroned, yet its overthrow is certain. Nothing is more

sure. And the overthrow may come in unexpected ways and with startling suddenness. We have not to take our stand on a hopeless righteousness. Evil will be dethroned.

> "For right is right, since God is God,
> And right the day will win;
> To doubt would be disloyalty,
> To falter would be sin."

In this chapter we have a series of preparatory visions, a series of impressionist pictures, that crowd upon the writer's imagination, and furnish answers to some of the questions that must have been most seriously engaging his readers' minds. They give anticipations of what is to be unfolded in fuller detail. "And I saw another angel flying in mid heaven, having an eternal gospel to proclaim unto them that dwell on the earth, and unto every nation and tribe and tongue and people." The weapon of evil was worldly sovereignty and persecuting power. And what could overcome this power? Here is the answer. The lie will be conquered by the truth. It is the preaching of an everlasting gospel that will bring to nought the efforts of Satan. In mistaken zeal Christians have often grasped the world's weapons. They have tried to put down heresy, unbelief,

atheism, by force. They have risen in rebellion against a persecuting power, and they have been crushed by it. They have taken the sword, and they have perished by the sword. We have all hankerings at times after making men moral and Christian by some form of compulsion. But nothing will overcome the lie but the truth. An everlasting gospel, preached in such a fulness as is suggested by the angel flying in mid heaven, is the sword of the Spirit for the overcoming of Satan in the world.

But does there not seem to be very little of the evangel as we understand it in this everlasting gospel? There is no mention of God's love, or of Christ's sacrifice. It is an announcement of judgment and a call to fear. "Fear God, and give Him glory; for the hour of His judgment is come." There is indeed little here of what we may understand as the gospel. But do you think there would be no "good news" to these suffering Christians in having the claim of the living God set in opposition to the claim of the Roman Empire? Was it not this truth that needed to be set over against the falsehood that was deceiving the nations? The Empire claimed divine honours, and truth met the claim with the assertion of His right who is the Creator of all things. There is

truth in the phrase, "The gospel for the age." Not that the gospel is a varying thing. Not that any side of truth ever becomes less true. But aspects of truth that meet the needs of one age do not appeal with the same force to another. And it is a feature of a gospel that can be called everlasting, that it is able to turn one facet of its complete truth to face the falsehood that is deceiving the age. Now, what Rome was denying at this time was the fundamental truth of religion, and the writer meets that denial by setting forth God's claim. To proclaim One the fear of Whom would not enslave but ennoble, whose judgment was the world's hope, was the "good news" for the age. The preaching of this truth could alone destroy the lie.

When an age is worshipping some falsehood, the gospel for the age is the assertion of the truth that is neglected or denied. When the Church of Rome forgot that the relation between God and man must be a spiritual one, the gospel for that age was the bringing into prominence of the value and power of faith in God. And it may be that we are living in a time when the message of God needs a fresh statement. We too are in danger of worshipping a falsehood, the falsehood that every

man is for himself—a hard, loveless individualism, that would turn mankind into a mob of plunging, struggling competitors, without sympathy or pity. It may be that we need to be reminded that this is not Christ's conception of mankind; that He thinks of the human race as a family, a kingdom, in which each shall find his highest good through the welfare of the whole, and in which no single individual can fail to come to his best without every other member feeling that his life is impoverished. It may be that the message of God for our age demands a new construction of society.

"And another, a second angel, followed, saying, Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great." And yet Rome, the Babylon of the Apocalypse, was still standing, apparently undiminished in power and glory. But in the sight of God it had already fallen. Its death-blow had been given. All that remained was to translate the ideal into actuality. Rome might hang like a withered branch, as it did for centuries, till some hurricane swept it to the ground. But life was with the Christian Church; with Rome, death. There are things that have a name to live, but they are dead. Their sentence has gone forth. And all that remains is to remove them from their

place in the life of man. Often it is a long process to get some mortally wounded falsehood dismissed from the earth. But it is only a question of time.

"And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a great voice, If any man worshippeth the beast and his image, and receiveth a mark on his forehead, or upon his hand, he also shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is prepared unmixed in the cup of His anger." These terrible words, along with those that follow, setting forth the doom of those that fail in the day of trial, are meant for warning. They give a picture, contrasting the condition of those who succumb with the joy and blessedness of those who stand firm in their allegiance to the Lamb. Happiness is opposed to misery; unresting service to unresting pain.

It is sometimes made matter of congratulation that Christian thought and preaching have dispensed with the images of physical torture that characterised the thought and preaching of a bygone day. We now recognise that in this chapter we have spiritual realities set forth in symbol, just as the writer sets forth spiritual realities of another kind by the symbols of golden streets and gates of pearl and foundations of precious stones. We may

look upon this change that has come over thought as an emancipation; but still we have to ask, "Emancipation from what?" In looking upon these words as symbolic, are we forgetting that they *do* stand for realities? and that the symbol does not express more than the reality, but less? When thought has outgrown the imagery, it does not follow that it has outgrown the spiritual truth that it contains. Now, let us try to look at the reality represented. Those who have forsaken the ranks of Christ's followers, and have received the mark of the beast, shall share in the perdition of the beast. Those who have let the character of the beast take possession of them, who have accepted the selfishness, the cruelty, the lust, of the beast instead of the character of the Lamb,—what words or images could express the degradation, the torment, the unceasing remorse of their condition? Even the genius of Dante needed to have recourse to pictures which we can only characterise as horrible, to express the punishment of him who nurtures the character of the beast within him. He saw a serpent-monster fasten on one of the souls in Hell. "And then followed a marvellous, an awful transmutation and blend of the two into a third something, such as human eyes never

saw. Like wax the man melted into the serpent, the serpent into the man." Neither the one nor the other seemed now what it was, but a horrible blend of man and reptile. This is one of the most loathsome pictures in the *Inferno*. But does it express more than the reality? Is it not dullness of moral sense which makes us regard the spiritual transmutation as less loathsome than the physical? That John felt that only in the imagery of this chapter, and Dante, that only by so loathsome a transmutation scene, could the spiritual state of those who prove unfaithful to Christ be represented, ought surely to come home to us with deterrent effect, as this imagery would undoubtedly come home to the Christians that were face to face with the temptation to apostacy. To have been among those who called themselves the followers of the Lamb, and to have proved unfaithful in the hour of trial,—what images can adequately express the degradation and misery of it? It means "an anguish that only spirits can know; the sense of something lost; endless discontent with what has been exchanged for it; the undying worm of conscience." The place among the followers of the Lamb that has been renounced makes "the hell of solitude and selfishness profoundly and inconceivably

dark." Sin and its punishment cannot be adequately spoken of in words and images that do not make us shudder.

And over against this lurid picture of the misery of those who find life by apostacy from Christ, the writer places a contrasted picture of the blessedness of those who have to accept death as the issue of their faithfulness. "And I heard a voice from heaven saying, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; for their works follow with them." The Church has come to understand these words as referring generally to the blessed dead. And doubtless it is justified in so doing. But we ought not to forget that they have a richer significance, as referring primarily and specially to the Christians of Asia, and to all Christians in similar circumstances. The words, "from henceforth," shadow forth a time when the promise would have a special truth and significance. They point to a coming struggle in which many would perhaps be tempted to seek life by drawing back from the faith, a time when to die in the Lord would mean to die a martyr. The writer does not try to hide the severity of the coming trial from them. It is the best policy to prepare them

for it, lest they be taken unawares, and overborne by the suddenness of the onrush of the enemy. The fire of persecution which was already kindled would burn with a fiercer flame. The crisis was near, even at the door. For many of them, to continue faithful would mean death. But death would bring release from conflict: "That they may rest from their labours." What these words would mean for the Christians of Asia we cannot conceive. They promise deliverance from the crushing and grinding oppression that lay upon them. Death would come to them "with the heavenly manner of relieving guard." The hand of the persecutor could reach them no more. They would rest from their labours, have relief from their toils, release from their warfare. That would be much, but it would not be all. "Their works follow with them." Death would not mean a great gulf fixed between the interests and employments of earth and those of heaven. There would be no break in the continuity of their life.

One other question must have risen to the minds of John's readers: Is this state of things to go on for ever? Will generation after generation, and century after century, and age after age, see the same battle going

on, never interrupted, never decisive? Are good and evil to contend for the mastery eternally? "How is it all to end?" we find ourselves saying many a time, as doubtless John's readers said before us.

In this vision the writer anticipates the final answer. It *is* to end. History is moving towards a goal. There is to be a harvest and a vintage. There is to be a reaping of all that is valuable and permanent in human life, of all that has ripened under the fostering influences of God. And there is to be a gathering of all that owes its existence to other causes than God, and has fattened and grown gross in the world. "Nothing that has been effected in society, by laws, by institutions, family memorials, traditions, by the voice of prophets and the deeds of patriots; nothing that has been effected by the growth and purification of the individual soul, by the various influences of Nature, by the voice of mothers, by the powers of mutual affection, by sorrows and separations, by reconciliations and hopes, no devout wish that has ascended in prayers and sacrifices, having first been inspired by Him to Whom it was offered, is to be lost. The Son of Man has watched it all, has laid it among His treasures; all has proceeded from Him, and will be owned by

Him."[1] And, on the other hand, "the vine of the earth, representing all that is not of God's planting, all the thoughts and deeds of blood that have sprung from the rebellious will of man, and which have made the world drunk and foul,"[1] all these unhallowed fruits are appointed for destruction in the winepress of the wrath of God. The natural year is a parable of human history. As there has been a sowing, so will there be a reaping; as there have been a planting and nurturing of the vine, so will there be a vintage. And this should be the most welcome news that could come to us.

This chapter must have been full of heartening to John's readers. The cause of God cannot fail. Its weapon is the truth, and the truth is invincible. And the same power that overcame the might of Rome is able to overcome whatever lifts itself up against God. Even now there are movements pierced to death that to the eye appear to be strong and flourishing. When a true idea has found a lodgment in the mind of any man, the opposing falsehood is mortally wounded. After that, it is only a question of time. And once more, the history of mankind is moving forward to a goal, when all that is worthy

[1] F. D. Maurice.

shall be brought forth to the light, and all that is unworthy shall be brought to nought. These thoughts are fitted to encourage all who are the followers of Jesus to stand against the temptation to apostacy, even though it bring worldly honour and life, and to stand fast in faithfulness, even though it bring suffering and death.

XIII

THE VIALS—VOICES OF JUDGMENT

"Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth."—REV. xvi. 15.

THE way is now clear, the minds of John's readers are now prepared and fortified, for the announcement of "the seven plagues, which are the last, for in them is finished the wrath of God." "After these things I saw, and the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was opened: and there came out from the temple the seven angels that had the seven plagues, arrayed with precious stone, pure and bright, and girt about their breasts with golden girdles. And one of the four living creatures gave unto the seven angels seven golden vials full of the wrath of God, who liveth for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God, and from His power; and none was able to enter into the temple, till the seven

plagues of the seven angels should be finished." These plagues are represented as contained in vials—shallow, saucer-shaped vessels—whose contents could be poured out together and in a moment.

The first thing that is noticeable in the description of these plagues is that there is a close similarity between them and those that are spoken of under the figure of the trumpets. In both cases the first four have reference to the earth, the sea, the rivers and fountains of water, and the sun, all of which have been cursed by sin and turned to man's destruction. The events of Nature and Society to which these plagues refer, we cannot now distinctly trace, because we have lost the historical key; but they would rise at once to the minds of John's readers. They shew an appalling state of things. The Empire had thirsted for blood, and Nature and the upheavals of Society had combined to give it blood to drink in abundance.

"The fifth angel poured out his vial upon the throne of the beast; and his kingdom was darkened." When the fifth angel sounded his trumpet, John saw a star from heaven fallen to the earth. Rome had declined from her pristine virtue, and had proved unfaithful to her great trust. She had become an easy

prey and a convenient instrument for the purposes of the fallen dragon. At his instigation, and apparently in the interests of the unity of her Empire, the claim to divine honours had been put forward. The Empire was to be bound together by the bonds of a common religion. All nations were to bow the knee before the throne of Cæsar. But the claim that had been intended to bring unity was bringing confusion. The kingdom of the beast was darkened. The throne of the beast, all that was associated with the blasphemous claim, was involved in a common destruction.

"And the sixth poured out his vial upon the great river, the river Euphrates; and the water thereof was dried up, that the way might be made ready for the kings that come from the sunrising." A comparison of this plague with the judgment of the sixth trumpet shews that these kings from the sunrising are Eastern warriors, who are to be the instrument in the hand of God for the punishment of guilty Rome. In the writer's eyes the events of Nature and history are messengers from God. God as well as Satan has His chosen instruments on earth. And in the "Parthian terror" John saw one of them. The great barrier between East and West was to be removed. The river was to become a high-

way for the hosts of the Lord. Such is the preparation on the one side for the battle that is to determine the issue of this struggle between good and evil. And there is preparation on the other side also. All the nations that were allied with Rome were involved in her fate. They became possessed with a blinding infatuation. "I saw coming out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet,"—a name which is given to the native provincial council, perhaps because it employed some magician as its chief agent in deceit,—"three unclean spirits, as it were frogs; for they are spirits of devils, working signs; which go forth unto the kings of the whole world, to gather them together unto the war of the great day of God, the Almighty." Allied kings were brought under the glamour of Rome's power and deceit. They were fascinated and infatuated by her apparent greatness, by her supernatural pretensions, and by the magic with which these were supported. And they joined with her, and fell in her overthrow. It would not be difficult to point to nations in modern times that have taken the wrong side in a struggle, and have more or less suffered through their choice.

"And the seventh poured out his vial upon the air . . . and there were lightnings, and voices, and thunders; and there was a great earthquake, such as was not since there were men upon the earth, so great an earthquake, so mighty." The seventh trumpet had ushered in the phase of the struggle between good and evil that was represented by the conflict of the Church with the persecuting Empire. And the seventh vial could only set forth the culmination of that struggle. Rome was a material and historical embodiment of the evil power and principle. Rome was the centre of Empire. And only with judgment upon Rome could the struggle be brought to an end. "And Babylon the great was remembered in the sight of God, to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath. And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found." The fall of the Eternal City it might well seem to the Christians of the first century that even the world itself could not survive.

Such seems to be the meaning of the symbolism of the chapter so far as we can reach it now. But there are other questions that suggest themselves in connection with these judgments. The vials are the last of a series of three. What relation do the

members of the series hold to one another? The vials are said to contain "the last plagues, for in them is finished the wrath of God." In what sense are they the last? Are we to think of the series as in historical sequence, so that first the seals are opened, and after an interval the trumpets are sounded, and after another interval the vials are emptied? If we knew more about them, could we point to a line of historical events, like the Turkish Invasion and the French Revolution, of which they were the symbols and the predictions? This was at one time a favourite way of interpreting the Book of Revelation; and the influence of it has not wholly gone even yet.

Throughout our consideration of the Book we have taken for granted that the writer is thinking of his readers and their necessities, and is keeping close to his purpose of encouraging them. In their situation all the elements of the Book of Revelation are to be found, though their circumstances, or the circumstances of any age, do not exhaust the significance of them. Just because we hold by the belief that the writer had a definite historic situation in view, the situation of the first century, we can eliminate what was non-essential, and apply the permanent principles to our own time, or to any time. What is

spiritual is not true at one time and untrue at another. The spiritual is always true. And because this Book shews the working of spiritual principles as they were embodied in the circumstances of John's time, we can be sure that the same principles are manifesting themselves in the movements of history now.

How the various members of the series stand to one another may be brought out more clearly if we consider in turn the relations that Christians and the world hold to them.

1. What relation do the people of God hold to the members of the series? We spoke of the opened seals as introducing elements of contemporary life and history. The phenomena that they represented went to make up the conditions in which the Christians had to live. War, Famine, Pestilence, Social Unrest, Persecution, cast heavy shadows across their lives. Equally with the pagans, they had to bear the hardships which these things entailed. The phenomena of Nature and of Society make no distinction between the righteous and the wicked. But the Christians knew that all these phenomena are under the power of Christ. It is His hand that opens the seals. And against the destructive powers that are thus let loose the Christian has a sure protection. The seal of God is upon his

forehead. War and Famine, Pestilence and Persecution, can do him no real harm. His life is "hid with Christ in God." And Christ will make these experiences even contribute to the final victory and perfection of His people.

The seventh seal unfolds its contents in the trumpets. And we found one feature strongly marking the judgments of the trumpets, national decay in every direction. It was this national decay that paved the way for the surrender to the spirit of evil which was embodied in the claim that the Empire made to divine honours. It was a nation on the downgrade that Satan captured as the fit instrument for his work. The Great Apostacy was possible because Rome was declining. It was to buttress a decaying power, which was resting less and less on the old foundations of righteousness, that the claim was made. That claim was in the sight of John the crowning iniquity, the depths of Satan. And the Christians were living in the midst of a society that agreed in admitting the claim. But they refused to acknowledge it. They were enduring all the persecution that that refusal entailed. They were no longer fellow-sufferers with their pagan brethren. They were a minority, fighting against the spirit of the time

and for the Lamb. And even in the midst of the conflict they had the victory; and they were passing on to the full victory when the harvest of the earth should be reaped.

And now we come to the third stage in the relation of God's people to these judgments. They are no longer sufferers and strugglers, but victors. "And I saw as it were a glassy sea mingled with fire; and them that come victorious from the beast, and from his image, and from the number of his name, standing by the glassy sea, having harps of God." They are no longer in the fight, but victors returned from it. They no longer utter prayer, the symbol of struggle. Prayer has been turned into song. "They sing the song of Moses the servant of God,"—that song which is the type of thanksgiving for every deliverance from the oppressor that is given to men here below,—"and the song of the Lamb,"—which will gather up all earth's songs of deliverance into one mighty hymn of praise. They have overcome, and the wrath of the beast can reach them no more.

Thus we look at the Christians as standing in a threefold attitude to these elements of history. They share in some of them, and even possess a mystic chemistry that is able to turn them into the means of growth in

power and holiness. They stand in opposition to them in as far as they have been captured by the spirit of evil, and they suffer the worst that evil fighting for its life can inflict. And at length they are delivered from them, and, as spectators of the last act of a tragedy, look upon their operation in the doomed world.

2. Look now at the relation of the world to this triple series of judgments. Like the followers of Christ, the world suffers from the opening of the seals. The horrors of war, of famine, of pestilence, fall upon the wicked as upon the just. They are the common visitations of God. But when men have not the spiritual alchemy to turn them into the gold of character, they have no promise of protection from the evil that they bring. No protective mark is set upon their foreheads. From the phenomena of Nature and the changes of Society the wicked can never get the gain that they may be made to give.

And for them the trumpets sound, warning and threatening. The revolt of the world from God turns the events of Nature into judgments, and these, as the symbol "trumpets" indicates, become a summons to repentance. Their purpose is to call to repentance. Is not this suggested, also, by the fact that the plagues that fell at the sounding of the trumpets

touched only a part of the earth? Do we not see the same thing happening every day? Full punishment does not fall upon sin immediately. And yet we can always see enough of it falling to reveal sin to us in its true light. We see sins, of which we may be conscious in ourselves, working out their baneful results in the lives of others, while we escape for the moment. And that is God's trumpet summoning us to repent while there is opportunity. Is it not as if God were drawing a line under our sins, underscoring them, emphasising them, and saying, "Except ye repent, ye shall likewise perish"?

But while the purpose of the sounding of the trumpets was to summon to repentance, we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that the result was twofold. Some indeed listened to the call and repented. The Church was growing daily. Scales were falling from darkened eyes. Many were leaving the ranks of the army of Satan, and were joining the army of the Lamb. That was happening when John wrote, and it is happening still. The judgments of God are leading men to repentance. But on the other hand it was also true that there were some who refused to listen, and who were hardening their hearts against God. They were driven deeper and deeper into their alliance with the

beast. So has it always been in the experience of the preacher of repentance. It has seemed to some that it was their very mission to make the hearts of their hearers fat, and their ears heavy, and their eyes blind. So is it still. Every time the gospel is preached, there are some that listen, and are inclined to repentance. But for others repentance is only made all the more difficult.

And so in time, for such, the trumpets become vials. As trumpets they have done their work. They have sounded the call to repentance in deaf ears. The cup of the worship of the beast is full. And the visitations of God are no longer trumpets, summoning to repentance, but vials, emptied out in wrath. Then they have no softening or converting function. They are God's judgments upon all that is incurably evil. They stand for the same phenomena as the trumpets; but these phenomena have one function towards those who have not yet irretrievably yielded to the beast, and another towards those who have received his mark and his nature as theirs. To some they still bring the call of mercy, to others the outpouring of judgment. Events, that are trumpets to some, are vials to others.

And is it not so still? There are some

to whom the events of our time are calling loudly to repentance. Would that we were listening to their call! And there may be others to whom the same events do not call, because they have stopped their ears and refused to listen; for whom the trumpets have become vials, finishing, as far as they are concerned, the wrath of God.

"Behold, I come as a thief." We do not know when the transformation of trumpets into vials may take place for any one of us. We do not know what time the mercy of God, disclosed even in the punishment of sin, may give place to judgments that there is no escaping. We do not know when God may say regarding any one of us, "He is joined to his idols; let him alone." "Blessed is he that watcheth."

XIV

THE PASSING OF ROME

"And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come forth, My people, out of her, that ye have no fellowship with her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues: for her sins have reached even unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities."—REV. xviii. 4, 5.

THE seventh angel poured out his vial upon the air. "And Babylon the great was remembered in the sight of God, to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath." That was the climax of the judgment. Babylon the great was the instrument of Satan, through whose activities he was able to reach the followers of the Lamb. As long as *she* was standing, Satan had still a stronghold on the earth. With her destruction the foul spot from which contagion spread over the world would be removed. So important was that judgment upon Babylon that the writer devotes the seventeenth and eighteenth chapters to the detailed account of it. Sometimes a map gives not only the general

outline of a whole country, but on a larger scale an inset of some important part of it, such as the chief town. So here, in addition to the summary of judgment set forth under the seventh vial, there is given a detailed account of the overthrow of the chief opponent of Christ upon earth, Babylon the great. It is this judgment that we are now to consider.

There are three visions concerning Babylon. The first, occupying the seventeenth chapter, gives *a description of her position.* Now, there is much in this chapter into which I do not intend to go, for two reasons. (1) There is a good deal, which on the surface looks simple and certain, but which proves insoluble on closer study. This chapter, for example, seems to many commentators to give a certain clue to the date at which the book was written. What could give more hope of exact knowledge than the words, "They are seven kings; the five are fallen, the one is, the other is not yet come"? This would be quite plain if we only knew what or who were represented by the already fallen kings. Are they, as some think, the great Empires of the past, Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece; while the one that is is the Roman? This does not give us much help in fixing the date. Or are they, as others hold, the Emperors that had

ruled over the Roman Empire? But even then, it is not generally agreed what name we are to begin with, or whom we are to include. Are we to begin with Julius Cæsar or with Augustus? If we are to begin with Augustus, are we to include all the Emperors that are recognised by modern historians, Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian? Or are we to omit such as Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, all of whom perished in a single year, and who were probably never acknowledged in Asia Minor, for which this book was written? Whichever view we take, there is some difficulty in making the result agree with a very early tradition, that John was banished to Patmos in the reign of Domitian, and that he wrote the Revelation then. And the conditions of the reign of Domitian, when the State policy with regard to the Christians was fully developed, seem to suit the situation that is depicted in the book better than any other. With all the apparent simplicity and preciseness of the chapter, we are in a region where there is much uncertainty. We have lost the historical key. And (2) there is perhaps a gain in our being brought face to face with things in the Bible that are mysteries, and must remain mysteries. For we are

thereby led to distinguish between what is only of historical interest and what is vital to the faith and hope and life of every age. There are things that, however interesting it would be for us to be certain about them, do not touch faith. And there are things that it would be a great impoverishment of life not to be sure of. And this is the second reason why it is not necessary, in a course of lectures such as this, to discuss those questions. They do not affect the value of the book for us. We know the situation in its general outline. What does it matter whether that situation existed in the reign of Nero or in that of Domitian? Wherever the same situation arises, whether in the first century or in the twentieth, the same principles are at work ; the same moral consequences, that know no centuries, fall with unerring certainty, here as there, now as then.

On one point there is a fair amount of agreement, that the woman on the scarlet beast, as far as the Christians to whom John wrote were concerned, was Rome, the imperial city, the capital of the Empire and of the world. I do not think that there can be any doubt that the writer had an actual city in view. And if this be so, no other city but Rome fits the case. "The woman whom

thou sawest is the great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth." Rome was the outstanding obstacle to all Christian hopes. The dominion that had its centre in Rome was the embodiment of all the anti-Christian forces that were in the world. It was the policy that was initiated in and directed from Rome that lay with such a crushing weight upon the lives of Christ's followers. It was the decrees that issued from Rome that adjudged death and exile and imprisonment to the steadfast. From Rome the whole world was ruled. From Rome the gigantic power that was put forth against the Church of Christ proceeded. Rome was the embodiment of the spirit of evil. The hammer that was crushing the Church under its repeated blows was in the province; but the steam that moved it was generated in Rome. And nothing would hearten the suffering Christians so much as the assurance from the lips of one such as John, that the might of Rome was not beyond the power of God to overcome and destroy.

Let us look, then, more closely at this vision of Rome in the seventeenth chapter. And the first thing that we note is that the seer was not blind to her power and glory. The signs of withering strength were not as

yet visible upon her. Her territory had not yet begun to shrink. Her glory had not yet begun to wane. Her riches and her luxury were growing ever greater. And the writer does not hesitate to paint all this into his picture of the imperial city. There is not an untrue stroke in it. The woman is arrayed in purple and scarlet, the colours of empire. She is decked with gold and precious stones and pearls. The wealth of the whole world is poured into her lap. She holds in her hand the golden cup of an advanced civilisation. She is poised upon the beast, the symbol of the Empire. She sits upon many waters—that is, rules over many subject peoples and nations. Tributary kings carry out her behests. It is a remarkable picture of the wealth and glory and dominion of Rome that the writer gives. Not a single feature is suppressed. He sets forth, too, all the apparent hopelessness of the situation of the Christian Church. He lets us see the power and the dazzling splendour of Rome, and the madness of any man, or any body of men, setting themselves in opposition to her. We know nothing in modern times like this situation, where authority was all on one side, and the necessity for submission all on the other. And the writer portrays but the bare truth.

But that is not all that he sees. His eye is not so dazzled by the splendour of the golden cup as to be blind to the abominations that it contains. He portrays them with the same faithfulness. He speaks of Rome's sin under the figure by which Israel's prophets had so often characterised apostacy from God. Her apostacy was open, flagrant, blazoned on her forehead. She was utterly shameless in her pretensions. Her blasphemous claim to divine honours was flaunted everywhere. This was the sin that overshadowed all others in the eyes of the writer and his readers, because it was the sin that touched them. It was the sin that Rome would force them to commit. Therefore it is the sin that the writer singles out for condemnation. Rome was full of the names of blasphemy. "The imperial title, 'Divine Augustus,' was not only borne by the Emperor, but was repeated a thousand times, on temples, statues and coins, so that the city reeked with the offence." And not only was she herself full of blasphemy; she had seduced all the nations under her sway to commit the same sin. Not only did she claim divine honours; she insisted that they should be paid by her subjects, that temples should be reared to her, that altars should be erected and sacrifices offered and festal days held in

celebration of her worship. And for all who refused to comply with her demands, she had but one word, death. She was "drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus." This was the Great Apostacy that was rampant within her, which she compelled all her subjects to follow. She claimed divine honours, and she was prepared to go all lengths to enforce her demand. Can we not see, then, why Rome is so singled out for mention in a book written in Asia Minor to strengthen the Christians against idolatry? It was in Rome that the whole State policy was hatched, and from Rome that it was enforced. It was her agents who carried on the work of persecution. She controlled the beast and all the tributary kings and princes. In her name they fought against the Lamb. Rome and her claim were anti-Christ. And she would go down before Christ. "The Lamb shall overcome them. And they also shall overcome that are with Him, called and chosen and faithful." What a strong faith in God must the writer have had, before he could look so steadily upon all the power and glory and wealth and sovereignty that were before his eyes, and affirm that these must fall before the feeble and scattered Church that was Christ's representative in the world!

Such is the first vision that the writer saw concerning Rome. Such was the faith he sought to inspire. Rome was the stronghold of anti-Christ in the world. But there was a power above Rome's. The power of the Lamb, the power of love, the power of God, was stronger than her might. The Eternal God was greater than the Eternal City.

There is one feature in the description of Rome to which we have not yet called attention. She is called "mystery." And the word does not mean here an insoluble enigma, but a symbol, an outward object that stands for hidden qualities. Rome was the visible symbol of an invisible spirit. Herein lies the teaching of the chapter for all time. The symbol changes from age to age. The spirit persists, and clothes itself in new forms, and takes to itself new embodiments. Rome was called Babylon, because she had the spirit of old Babylon, the spirit of antagonism to God. Now, many have found a reference in this chapter to Papal Rome. This has been the favourite interpretation with a large section of the Protestant Church. Our fathers usually spoke of the Roman Catholic Church as the Scarlet Woman. Any such interpretation must, of course, be rejected, save only in so far as the Roman Catholic Church may

possess the spirit of antagonism to God that characterised old Rome, the spirit of ancient Babylon. And the same standard must be applied to every Church whether Catholic or Protestant; to every empire, whether Roman or British; to every city, whether Rome, or Paris, or London, or Edinburgh; to every civilisation, whether ancient or modern. Wherever there is the spirit of anti-Christ, of antagonism to God, there is Babylon. We cannot point to any one age and say, "There is the Scarlet Woman." We cannot lay the flattering unction to our souls that there is no embodiment of the same ungodly spirit among ourselves. Is there no influence leading men away from God to-day? Are there not elements in our civilisation that would deprive God of the place that He should have in our hearts and lives? Is there not among us a practical atheism, that does not indeed set up outward objects of worship; that does not forbid, but rather encourages, men to pay a formal devotion to God; that does not apply the epithet "divine" to wealth, or place, or power, but that in reality does give them the homage of the heart that is due to God alone, and does make them the supreme end of human endeavour? Are there not policies in which God is allowed no place? Even when

we profess to acknowledge God as the only true God and our God, do we not often join with our profession the cynical thought, that God must be kept in His own place, out of our politics, out of our commerce, out of our daily life? We discuss foreign policy and home policy and commerce and taxation from the point of view of economics. Do we not forget that there are moral considerations that must come in? that the main question is not how we shall become a wealthier and more powerful nation, but how we shall become a nation of better men, and help to make the world a world of better men? To leave these moral considerations on one side, as if they had nothing to do with the matter, is to deny God His place, and oust Him from the sphere where most of all we need His guidance. "We have found Babylon in the Papacy," says Frederick Denison Maurice, "we have forgotten to look for it among ourselves. We have not seen that the harlotry of sense is at work everywhere; that everywhere men are tempted to become idolaters; that everywhere there are seducers, withdrawing them from their true Husband and Lord. The far-off evil we have discerned; its punishment we are prepared to hail; that which is at our own doors, at our own hearts, is not visible to us;

we do not remember that God is no respecter of persons; that churches that acknowledge the supremacy of Rome and churches that reject it, individual Papists and individual Protestants, Pharisees and Publicans, will alike be winnowed with His fan—must alike have their chaff consumed with unquenchable fire."

The second vision, contained in the eighteenth chapter, describes in graphic language *the fate of the apostate city*. That fate is represented by the symbol of the destruction of a great and wealthy city by fire. Perhaps we have one of the few references in the book to the destruction of Jerusalem in the words, "Render unto her even as she rendered, and double unto her the double according to her works: in the cup which she mingled, mingle unto her double." With dramatic power does the writer picture the kings that had made alliance with her, and the merchants that had become rich through ministering to her luxury, and the seafaring communities that made their living by her vast carrying trade, standing afar off, and bewailing her fall. She has drawn all into the vortex in which she has gone down.

With regard to this forecast of the fate of

Rome, there are one or two things worthy of note.

1. From the point of view of John, Rome is not condemned for luxury. Towards her rich civilisation the writer seems more than sympathetic. Rather is it suggested that she has proved a traitor to her past, and has, by the apostacy of a generation, destroyed a civilisation that had taken centuries to build up. In the long list of her imports we do not recognise any that were not, in the circumstances of the time, legitimate. All of them were the products of the rich world that God has given to the children of men. It had taken centuries of toil to bring forth a community that was capable of enjoying those gifts of God. Brave men had thought and toiled and fought and died that there might be a city into whose lap the world could pour its wealth. But to all that great past Rome proved a traitor. All went down in her overthrow.

Is there not a lesson for our own age here? Sometimes we condemn civilisation with a vehemence that God will not own. He has given the earth to the children of men. And who will place a limit to the gifts of God that, with His blessing, we may safely enjoy? Who will say that our own nation is too rich?

that her imports are too numerous and varied and costly? that her standard of living is too high? that her commercial relations are too wide? that her life is too full of the luxuries that the earth produces, if she is in truth a God-fearing nation? Doubtless there are dangers in these things, but they are the dangers incidental to every advance in civilisation. God has given us all things richly to enjoy. The earth is to be subdued and made fruitful. And have we not reason to cherish the memory of our fathers who, by their courage and industry and energy, have made such a life possible for us? How many centuries has it taken to bring our civilisation up to its present standard! And is it not a thought that should make us pause, that apostacy from God may imperil and destroy all this; that an unfaithful generation may precipitate the overthrow of what it has taken so much effort to build up? That was what happened in the case of Rome. The barbarians swept over Europe, and civilisation had to be begun afresh from the very foundations.

2. Then, again, there is a call to God's people to separate themselves from Rome's doings. "And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come forth, My people, out

of her, that ye have no fellowship with her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues." Is this a call to them to wash their hands of the world and its affairs? to fly from Rome to some desert place, where, afar from the turmoil of life, they might worship God alone? Thousands of men and women heard the call in this sense in the early ages of Christianity. They left the world, save in so far as they carried the world with them into their solitudes. But that is not the sense in which the writer understands the command, even with reference to the first Christians. Nor can it be the meaning of it to us. We cannot, consistently with our duty to the world, with our duty to ourselves, with our duty to God, take the easy way of throwing off the burden of living from our shoulders. We must bear it. But we must bear it as witnesses for God. "Walk as children of the light," said the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians, —even in Ephesus, amid the gross darkness of heathenism and superstition and sorcery. "Walk as children of the light." So to the followers of Christ in the Empire does this writer speak. He says, "Come out of her." She had allowed herself to be drawn aside to a blasphemous worship. She had forgotten the Creator, and had given divine honours to

the creature. The followers of Jesus must acknowledge in their hearts and lives the Living God, must have no fellowship with her sins, must walk as those who had received the light, even the knowledge of God, the Eternal and Loving Father.

The warning was needed then; it is not less needed now. It was difficult, it is always difficult, to escape the subtle, pervasive, penetrating influence of the spirit of the age. The idolatry of the Empire was in the air. It pervaded all public and even private acts of life. One could not lift his eyes in the street without their lighting on some building or statue that was a concrete embodiment of the blasphemous claim. One could not join his fellow-citizens in any public function without having the same claim forced upon his attention by some action. One could not finger a coin without being reminded that the image and superscription belonged to "the Divine Augustus." And falsehood that is so persistently pressed home upon the attention is bound at length to find some lodgment, unless strong and conscious efforts are made to keep it out. Hence the need for the warning of the text. It is an exhortation to stand with the Lamb in the midst of a world that has stampeded after

the beast. And is not the same exhortation needed to-day, all the more needed that the power that is antagonistic to God now is subtle and impalpable? How shall we keep ourselves free from the contagion of practical atheism, the all-pervading denial of God's right to control every department of our life, and to sway every motion of the soul? We need the warning to live in intimate nearness to Christ, lest we participate in that withering of all power and loftiness of life which this desolating atheism cannot fail to bring upon every nation or individual that comes under its blighting breath.

The third vision brings before us more forcibly *the suddenness and completeness* of the fall of Rome. "And a strong angel took up a stone as it were a great millstone, and cast it into the sea, saying, Thus with a mighty fall shall Babylon, the great city, be cast down." We have seen in the first vision vague intimations of disaster; in the second, the cutting off of all the luxuries of life; here, we see the extinction of life itself, of all that is the very foundation of a society, the craftsman's craft, the grinding of the corn for the household meal, the light of the lamp in the home, the voice of the bridegroom and the bride, the institution of marriage

which assures that the present dying generation shall be followed by another. These are the very elements without which society cannot exist. And all these, tainted with the Great Apostacy, are to go down with it. The very foundations of human life shall be destroyed. And not only completely but suddenly. Like the splash of a great stone in the sea shall perish all that is allied with forces fighting against God.

Against the truth of this vision two objections may be urged. 1. It may be said that the roots of Rome's fall go much farther back than the Christian era, and that it is not the way of history to lay so great a burden of weal or of woe upon the shoulders of a single generation. But John is not writing as a historian, but as a prophet of God. And it is ever the way of the prophet to single out the sins of his own time, and hold them up as the cause of whatever evils may lie wrapt up within the veiled future. There is a sense in which every generation is responsible for the woes whose causes may lie in the sins of many generations. For it is always open to any single generation, by repentance and reformation, to reverse the downward progress. And the prophet of God will endeavour to lead the men of his own age to repentance, by

bringing home to their consciences their sole responsibility for their own lives, as the one link in the chain of causes over which they have power.

2. A second objection may be urged, that in the actual course of history Rome did not fall with the suddenness and irretrievableness of this vision. Rome lingered on, and, though it was sacked and burned in the fifth century by Alaric the Goth, the "Scourge of God," it never experienced the complete destruction that the vision seems to imply. The very elements of Society were never crushed out of it. But the same answer applies to this objection as to the former. John is not writing history but prophecy. Gibbon wrote his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as the splendid panorama of twelve crowded centuries passed before his mind's eye. But John speaks of the certain outcome of its contemporary life, as insight into and faith in God's purpose told him that its forces must work out. Gibbon tracked out the stream of events. But John looks into the heart of things, and he says in vivid and startling symbol, "The wages of sin is death." "There is no perspective in prophecy." And here we have not history or prediction mainly, but prophecy, the enunciation of eternal

principles, clothed in vivid symbol, and apprehended by faith. To this act of faith he urges his readers.

It is to the same faith that prophecy summons us at all times when the cause of Christ seems most hopelessly thrown back. It calls us to have faith in the ultimate triumph of what is right, and in the utter defeat of what is wrong. Destruction will overtake all that has the spirit of Babylon. It may come as when the body is stricken down with apoplexy; or it may come as when senile decay gradually withdraws the life from the outworks, to flicker out in the citadel. But it will come. This is the Christian faith. In this faith stand. By this faith conquer.

XV

THE WORD OF GOD

"And His name is called The Word of God."—REV. xix. 13.

THUS in a vivid picture has the writer announced what must be the fate of the city that has lent herself to be the instrument of Satan. And we might suppose that with the fall of Rome the great drama would come to an end. What could remain after the overthrow of the city in which Satan's power had come to a head? But destruction is never God's last word. Amid the Hallelujahs that rise in heaven over the overthrow of the power of anti-Christ we hear the prelude of a holier order of things that has been evolved through the stress and strain. The same praises that exult over the destruction of the harlot city announce the advent of the bride of Christ.

And so there comes within our view the end of all, the result of all the suffering and conflict of earth—a redeemed humanity, united

to Christ as the bride is to the bridegroom, as the wife to the husband. "And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunders, saying, Hallelujah: for the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigneth. Let us rejoice and be exceeding glad, and let us give the glory unto Him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made herself ready. And it was given unto her that she should array herself in fine linen, bright and pure: for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints." Arrayed in those beautiful garments, woven in the loom of life,—life with its joys and sorrows, its tribulations and its victories, its imperishable thoughts and hopes and longings,—she stands waiting the advent of her Beloved. Her garment is itself the testimony with what patience and what desire she has waited for Him, how eagerly she has longed for His coming, how zealously she has prepared herself that she might be worthy of His love. Here, as at every point of the book, the writer is stimulating his readers to be faithful to Christ. They shall wear their faithfulness as the garment in which they shall meet their Lord. With what shame shall they meet Him if it be torn or soiled! With what joy

shall they await Him if it is pure and bright as white linen! It is the same thought that we find running throughout the book. The faithfulness, the earnestness, the whole-heartedness of life here will determine the intensity of the life for which we look, when death is past, and the gains and losses of time are summed up. The tribulation of the present hour is hard to bear. The baptism of blood is cruel. The cup that is put into our hands is bitter. But the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed. Life will have its vindication in the beauty of character, in the spotlessness of the purity of those whom Christ has saved, and in such a oneness of mind and heart of the redeemed with Christ, that they can be called His bride, His wife.

But in thus introducing the bride of Christ, the writer is, as is his way, giving anticipations and suggestions of things to be more fully developed hereafter. He has still to bring the judgment of God to completion. We have seen a picture of the destruction of a material city. But this can only be a symbol of the fate that is to overtake all that lends itself to and allies itself with the dragon. The city that had become the haunt of every unclean bird might be destroyed. The nests

might be pulled down. But the birds, the unclean and blasphemous spirits that had been hatched there, had gone forth over the whole earth. The claims and ideals of the Empire had found for themselves centres of power in the provinces. And these claims and ideals, spiritual as they were, must be met and overthrown, not by a material agent like fire, but by a spiritual force. And it is this process that the writer goes on to set forth.

"And I saw the heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He that sat thereon, called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He doth judge and make war. And His eyes are a flame of fire, and upon His head are many diadems: and He hath a name written, which no one knoweth but He Himself. And He is arrayed in a garment sprinkled with blood: and His name is called The Word of God."

I have not thought it necessary to turn aside to-day from the course of exposition of this book to seek some topic more specially connected with this season.[1] At this time our minds naturally rest upon the fact of history that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. We dedicate this season of the year to all the thoughts and acts

[1] This lecture was delivered on 26th December 1909.

of life connected with that truth. We think of the promised peace on earth, of the love of God to His sinful, wandering children, of the assurance of forgiveness that He has sent us by the hand of Christ, of the new life that has become possible to men by His grace. Christ came into the world that all this might become our possession. And it is this coming of the Saviour into the world in human form that we remember at this season. But the Word of God was born into the world nineteen centuries ago in vain, unless He is being always born into the world; unless the world is being increasingly brought under His influence, and subdued by His Spirit into His obedience. The Word of God, which is the will of God so uttered that we can hear it and understand it, must become incorporate and incarnate in human nature and in the affairs of men. And the Word of God has become incarnate in Jesus in vain, unless day by day He is becoming incarnate in us, and the will of God is becoming more and more the law of our life, and we are attaining to the perfect man, the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

The battle and the conquest that are described in this chapter, then, are spiritual. The Word of God goes forth, conquering and to conquer. The world was cursed with a

great falsehood, Cæsar-worship. Only one power could deliver it from that curse—the Word of God bringing to men the true knowledge of God, the sharp sword of the Divine judgment, the inflexible rule of the Divine truth, the acknowledged sovereignty of the Divine Son. Nothing can deliver men from a degrading and immoral worship but the revelation of the true God; nothing can free from the slavery of sin and error but the freedom with which Christ makes men free. A material city may be destroyed by fire or earthquake; but falsehood can be destroyed only by the eternal verities, for which Christ and His followers stand. "And the armies which are in heaven followed Him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and pure. And out of His mouth proceedeth a sharp sword, that with it He should smite the nations: and He shall rule them with a rod of iron: and He treadeth the winepress of the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God. And He hath on His garment and on His thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS." It is no material warfare that is described here, but the victorious progress of truth over error and falsehood.

"And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to

make war against Him that sat upon the horse, and against His army. And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought the signs in his sight, wherewith he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image : they twain were cast alive into the lake of fire that burneth with brimstone : and the rest were killed with the sword of Him that sat upon the horse, even the sword which came forth out of His mouth." The writer follows out the various steps of his argument with the greatest consistency. He has announced the destruction of Rome; and the claim and policy that pressed so hard upon John's readers went forth from Rome. But that claim and policy were focused in the province, in the cities where they dwelt and suffered. And complete release would not be brought to the suffering Christians till the provincial authorities, and the false prophet, and all who lent themselves as willing instruments of the Great Apostacy, were taken out of the way. And hence the assurance that is given in this chapter. The persecution which they were suffering would be but temporary. The power that lifted itself up in support of the lie must go down before the progress of the truth. Think how great must

have been the encouragement of the assurance that the system which seemed so strong and cruel was passing with all its pomp and deceit into the lake of fire. The Christians had taken their stand on the opposite side from the power and glory of the world. But they were for life; their enemies for death. And the issue would come home to them with all the greater vividness and force, that they were reminded that it was no vague evil that Christ was fighting against, but the very real and present evil that oppressed them; and that the proud officials whose faces were so familiar in their streets, and the false prophet whose signs and wonders were so great a temptation to them to forsake Christ, stood for a system that was passing on to the utter destruction of the lake of fire.

The value of the Book of Revelation to us lies in the fact that we can take from it a like encouragement. The enemies of God, the forces that are setting themselves against righteousness, strongly entrenched as they may be in worldly power and wealth and intellect, are passing to utter destruction. The Word of God is advancing on His victorious progress, witnessing for the truth. There is not a falsehood that is leading the world astray, not an organisation that is corrupting

human life, not a worldly power that has identified itself with any anti-Christian spirit, not a demoralising influence in life, whose path does not end in the lake of fire. This is the message of this Book to all that look with dismay at the mighty power of evil that raises itself in opposition to Christ. It is a message that gives hope and courage to endure. It is a message that is applicable to every age. But as the ages of the Church's history go on, and its truth is verified over and over again, it is a message that should awaken a more and ever more hearty response in our faith. All that lifts itself against God, all that works misery and degradation, is already doomed to destruction. It has only to go on its way, and it will come to the lake of fire. And should not this be the best news that could come to us at this Christmas season, that the Word of God is in the world, overcoming every falsehood by the sword of His mouth, and setting men free from the bondage of ignorance and deceit? The song of the angels was not a vain song. All the promises that gather round the birth of Christ shall be fulfilled.

And now we come to the twentieth chapter, which has been the despair of commentators. Yet I think that it has a most natural meaning on the interpretation that has been followed

throughout these lectures. Indeed, without some such addition to his main message, the writer would have appeared deficient in the highest prophetic insight. Let us try to interpret this chapter by what we know of the ordinary course that history takes.

What is the course of any movement through which mankind has taken a step forward? To take a concrete example, what course did the campaign against slavery follow? There was first the long and arduous conflict against opposing forces, the efforts to persuade men, to overcome their selfish opposition, to rouse them to interest and activity, to stimulate them to enthusiasm, until at length the desired reform was carried, in America at the cost of a bloody war, in England by peaceful legislative enactment. The victory was gained. And what came next? A time of triumph and rest, when those who had suffered and overcome gathered in and enjoyed the fruits of their victory, and the world was bright with the afterglow of the triumph. After the toilsome climb up the slope came the level road along the summit of the ridge. But we know only too well that the abolition of slavery did not bring the golden age. It brought only a breathing-space. Since then other evils have appeared and gathered to a head, anti-

Christian forces of which the men of those days did not dream. And like battles have to be undertaken again, like sufferings have to be endured, like sacrifices have to be made. Only in this way, by repeated conflicts with successive embodiments of the spirit of evil, is the world progressing, and drawing nearer to the purity which God means it to attain. And the progress of the world is seen in the fact that every succeeding enemy manifests less of the crude ferocity of evil than did its predecessors. The embodiment of the spirit of evil tends to become more and more refined and spiritual. A Christian country, for example, knows no more the barbarities of the amphitheatre, or of Smithfield, or the ruthless attitude of former days to witchcraft. But there are enemies of Christ still; and only by meeting each new enemy as it appears, and overcoming it, will human effort, strengthened with the strength of Christ, exhaust the evil principle, and come to the position of a humanity redeemed and glorified. Every age has its own contribution to make to this progression of the world towards God. Some ages, such as the first century, and the fifteenth, and it may be our own,—for are there not signs that we are on the threshold of great events?—have a special contribution to

make. But every age has to meet the enemy that stands face to face with it. And for those that strive, the course is, first the conflict, then the victory, and then the breathing-space, during which the opposing forces prepare for a new struggle.

Now, does it not seem as if this is what the writer means to express in the symbolism of this chapter? He has led his readers up to the point where the prevailing falsehood is overcome and destroyed. The beast and the false prophet, and all who have identified themselves with these, are cast into the lake of fire. That is their final destruction. The one great lie is dead, slain by the sword that proceedeth from the mouth of the Word of God. The Great Apostacy in that form is settled. Henceforth the world shall hear no more of it. The world has rest from it. And with that heavy burden taken off the life, it will seem as if Satan had lost his power, as if he were bound and curbed in his work. "And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, the old serpent, which is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years,"—that is, for a strictly limited time,—"and cast him into the abyss, and shut it, and sealed it over him,

that he should deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years should be finished." And the other side of the same fact is that Christ triumphs and reigns; and those who have been faithful in the tribulation, whether they have fallen in it as men count falling, or whether they have survived their suffering, share in the blessedness and glory of that reign. "And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus, and for the word of God, and such as worshipped not the beast, neither his image, and received not the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they lived, and reigned with Christ a thousand years. . . . This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: over these the second death hath no power; but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years."

Some may doubt whether the writer could use such a word as "resurrection" to indicate the calm that was to succeed the storm. It may be difficult for us in these days to think of the deliverance from the persecution of a Nero or a Domitian as a resurrection; but would it be difficult for those that had to

endure it? If we try to realise how great must have been the oppression under which the Christians were living at the time, and what would be the relief, and not only the relief, but the triumph, that they would picture to themselves as John held the glowing hope of the victory of Christ before them, I think we shall come to see that the word contains no exaggeration. To take an example from our own history. "Lo, the winter is past" is the title that Dr. Smellie, the writer of *The Men of the Covenant*, gives to the chapter of his book in which he describes the change that came over the Scottish Kirk on the accession of William and Mary. It was like coming out of winter into spring. He says, "The Kirk had risen from the dust, and was robing herself afresh in her beautiful garments." We must not put a too literal and prosaic interpretation on the words in which a writer like John expresses hopes so great. The passing of the power of Rome before the truth of Christ would be a veritable resurrection to the persecuted. Christ would reign in the triumph of His gospel, and His suffering Church would come to its own and would reign with Him.

Christ reigns in the triumph of every good and righteous cause. And they who have

suffered and fought on its behalf reign with Him; but *only* they who have fought and suffered. You must note that. The writer makes it clear. "I saw the souls of them that had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus, and for the word of God, and such as worshipped not the beast, neither his image, and received not the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they lived, and reigned with Christ a thousand years." The oft-repeated description of the enemies of the Church, those who have the mark of the beast, is one of the key-words in the book. It represents Cæsar-worship, "Rome's worst deed." But just because the writer keeps so close to the outstanding evil of his time, we can take his words as applicable to the outstanding evil of every time, and of our own time. And do not the signs of the present day all point to the fact that we are in the midst of a great creative period of the world's history? We are

> "Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
> The other powerless to be born."

But the birthday of the new world is coming. The intellectual and the social unrest are combining to bring it. These are its birth-pangs. And the movements that are wrapt up

with it have their soldiers and martyrs. They suffer now. But when, in the triumph of the righteous cause, Christ shall reign, they shall reign with Him. But only those who are the soldiers and martyrs of the righteous cause shall have a share in its triumph. "The rest of the dead lived not till the thousand years should be finished." For those who have no earnestness in the service of Christ, and in His cause as it presents itself to us to-day, there will be no triumph, no reign with Christ. This is the heartening message of the chapter to all those who are bearing the burden of the world's sin and sorrow; it is the warning lesson to those who are not.

But the triumph of Christ is not yet complete. Satan lies chained in the abyss whence he came forth at the first to deceive men. But he is bound only for a thousand years, for a limited, if prolonged, time. "After this he must be loosed for a little time." His power for evil is not yet exhausted. He will come forth to practise, not the old deceit, for that would be hopeless, but some novel deceit, by which he can misguide the nations, and gather them against all that is of God, "the camp of the saints, and the beloved city." The world can be redeemed only by surmounting and overcoming every form in

which the evil principle can embody itself in history. Only through constant vigilance and repeated conquest of every form that evil takes can its power be ultimately exhausted.

It is a well-known fact that those who are engaged in some struggle for right think that when victory comes it will be well with the world ever after. And those who are most eager in one contest with evil often prove cold towards subsequent conflicts. The politician and social reformer who has been enthusiastic for one reform, often gives bitter disappointment to those who have to pursue his work to the end, by his apparent lukewarmness. The Christian apologist who has had a foremost place in one battle for the truth, loses touch with the new enemies that arise. He contents himself with fighting his old battles over again, and reslaying the slain. The generation that has come through one great crisis, a Reformation or a Disruption, may live on the memories of it, and may be content with the afterglow and feel no desire for the dawn of a new morning. All such make the mistake of thinking that the millennium, with its triumph and glory, is something abiding. Men of faith in the midst of a struggle can give to the question, "What of the night?" the answer, "The morning

cometh." Only men of the highest prophetic insight can add with equal faith, "And also the night." Our seer was one of these. Satan must be loosed again. He must try all his deceits. Only thus can his power to hurt and deceive men be exhausted. How close to life does this strange chapter come! How it drives us back from reliance upon all human effort, to faith in the ever-living, ever-working, ever-conquering Word of God!

But it may be asked, "If Satan must be loosed, not once, but again and again and yet again, till his power to deceive is exhausted, why does John mention only one release?" The answer is that here we have a foreshortening of history. The writer keeps close to his purpose of writing for the encouragement of his own generation. It is not often given to a single generation to see the powers of evil come above its horizon oftener than once. It is sufficient for John to warn that no single victory, however decisive it may appear on one particular point, settles the question once and for ever. It is enough to know that Satan's resources will be exhausted at the last, and that he will be cast, not into the abyss, whence he may come forth again to deceive men, but into the lake of fire,

where all his worn-out and defeated instruments already are.

One other picture the seer gives us, and it is one which is necessary to bring the long story of history to a close. "And I saw a great white throne, and Him that sat upon it. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne. And the dead were judged." It is an impressive picture of the bringing to a conclusion of human affairs. There is no need to dwell upon the details that are employed to intensify the solemn effect of the scene. It gains its greatest impressiveness from the witness of our own consciences to its fitness and its truth. These testify to a judgment-seat of Christ. And the principle of the judgment is also convincing. Every thing that is of life shall live. Whatsoever is not of life shall share in the utter destruction of the lake of fire. Let my closing word be one of entreaty. You and I must stand before that great white throne. You and I must be judged by this simple principle of life and death. But by that principle we can judge ourselves now. Are we following after life, or after death? Are our lives such as we can approve, such as we can expect God to approve? "The dead were judged out of the things that were written in the

books, according to their works." That brings the matter down to one of rare simplicity. "According to their works." Our works, our words, our thoughts have one of two qualities. They are *living* works, works that have life in them, that promote the life of the world, that help it in its striving after the eternal life with God. Or they are works that bring death, that make for the destruction of human life and society, whose end is the lake of fire. We can try our works by that principle now. "If any man judgeth himself, he shall not be judged."

XVI

LIFE MADE PERFECT

"He that overcometh shall inherit these things."—Rev. xxi. 7.

We feel, as we read these closing chapters, as if we had come out of a land of mountain passes and dangerous precipices and dark overhanging rocks and shapes of terror into a smiling, fruitful country. So the soldiers of Hannibal and Napoleon must have felt, when they left behind them the Alpine passes, with their ice and storms and death, and descended into the fertile plains of Italy. So Christian must have felt, when he emerged from the Valley of the Shadow of Death into the light of day. The struggle of history has been left behind. The long-continued battle has been fought and won. The dragon, the enemy of mankind, and his allies and instruments, have been cast into the lake of fire. The forces that destroy life have been themselves destroyed. Death and Hades have been cast into the lake of fire. The earth has been redeemed and

purified, and a new relation between earth and heaven has been established. All that separated and estranged man from man and nation from nation, all that alienated man from God, has been taken away. "I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth are passed away; and the sea is no more." We expect a conclusion like this to the Book of Revelation. A philosophy of history that does not justify history by its results is not satisfying. A glimpse of the "far-off Divine event" after the millennium, after the repeated millennia, after the judgment, is what is needed to crown the whole.

And we see from the words that have been chosen as the text, and which are, in a manner, central in the chapters, how closely the writer keeps to his purpose of strengthening and heartening his readers. "He that overcometh shall inherit these things." He is not describing for describing's sake. He is writing to men who were suffering, and he seeks to encourage them by disclosing the final result of faithful endurance. By his vision he tries to stimulate them to still greater faithfulness. We must keep this in view throughout our study of these chapters.

The writer, then, gives us a picture of the

perfected life of the faithful as it shall come forth from the discipline of history. He sets it forth in two visions which may be described as the far and the near view, but which for our purpose may be merged into one. It is a vision of life in its completeness. By means of many and varied images does the writer try to suggest its many-sidedness. But he can only suggest; he cannot set forth in its fulness. When he has written all, it is still true that that life embraces

"Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not,
And which entered not into the heart of man,
Whatsoever things God prepared for them that love Him."

In this lecture we shall bring together some of the outstanding points of his picture.

I. *The perfected life is pictured as the life of citizens.* "I saw the Holy City, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." It may seem strange that when he has just represented the judgment of the earth for its sins as the destruction of a great city, the writer should not have chosen some other image by which to set forth the Divine idea of life. Stranger still it seems, as we think how he must have passed in review the great cities of the past, and as we pass in review the great cities of to-day. The city contains within it

much that fills us with dread and despair. We think of it as the abode of evils that mock all our efforts to cope with them. It is the place of the slums, where poverty and misery and sin and vice, foul air and foul environment and foul deeds, breed and nurture each other. It is the place where, separated from them only by a street's length, wealth and luxury foster a life not less vicious and ugly than the life of the slums. The city is the place where the greatest contrasts are brought together in a common depravity. It is the place where temptation ensnares and murders its victims by thousands, where it seems hardest to keep life clean and sweet, where the air is laden with the most virulent germs of evil. We are tempted to think of the city as civilisation's most baneful product.

There is truth in all this. All the cities that we have known or read about seem to have been degraded in proportion to their wealth and greatness. But it is not the whole truth. There is another side to city life. There is something fascinating about a great city. There is a feature of the Divine idea of human life that is manifested there, as it is manifested nowhere else. There is something inspiring in the sight of many men and women, each making an individual contribution to the

enrichment of the general life, all working together for the accomplishment of a common task, all capable of being thrilled by a common joy or sorrow. In a city the individual finds his happiness and well-being in a common good. He feels that he is but one member of a vast organism, and that it is through the welfare of the organism that his individual welfare can be best ensured. The life of a citizen means the subordination of his narrow, individual interests to the more perfect and complex life of the whole. The city on its best side is not the disease of civilisation, but its crown, expressing in the fullest way the truth that man was meant to live a social life, and to find his good in and through the well-being of Society.

Thus the city stands for a feature of the perfect life that God has destined for mankind. It is the expression of the instinct that is in him to push out towards an increasingly complex network of relationships with other lives. And it speaks to the penetration of this great seer, that with Babylon and Jerusalem and Rome full in view, with all their dismal failure to be what God meant them to be, he does not turn aside from the city and seek some other symbol by which to represent the perfect life, but still looks upon

the city as essentially of God, and as expressing an aspect of the life that God means for His people.

We can imagine how full of encouragement this thought would be to those whose acceptance of Christ had put them outside all participation in an earthly citizenship. They had the same instincts for citizenship as their fellows. When they became Christians they did not cease to be citizens of the cities of Asia and of the great Roman Empire. The instincts that found their satisfaction in the varied and manifold relations and activities of life were not quenched within them. They still felt pride in the history and glory of their native city. They rejoiced in being citizens of no mean city. Patriotism still burned in their breasts, a patriotism that was all the richer and more tender that it was purified and ennobled by the Christian ideal. And yet they found themselves treated as enemies to their native city, and with the whole power of the State arrayed against them for their destruction. It must have been one of the hardest trials of the Christian life, that feelings so natural and human were thwarted. And the thought would be specially welcome to them, that those instincts that were denied an outgoing in common life would find the

fullest satisfaction and means of expression in the City of God.

II. A second feature of the perfect life is suggested by another image of which we have already caught a glimpse. *The Holy City, the community of the saints, is "made ready as a bride adorned for her husband."* John has already spoken of the bride of Christ, arrayed in fine linen, bright and pure, the righteous acts of the saints. Now, just as the life of citizens suggests God's people in mutual dependence and sympathy, so does this image set forth the relation of all together to Christ. And how much does this image imply if we take it in connection with other passages of the Bible! It implies the process by which mankind, from being stained with sin and weakened with failure, has come to be worthy of so honourable a name. It suggests what Christ did to save His Church.

> "From heaven He came and sought her,
> To be His holy bride;
> With His own blood He bought her,
> And for her life He died."

And it suggests how, by the discipline of His grace, that conflict which the early Christians were even then enduring, He freed her from all her sins and weaknesses, arrayed her in

the spotless robes of holiness, and made her inseparably one with Himself in mind and heart and soul, worthy to hold the most intimate fellowship with Him. And this is a feature of the perfect life that must have been welcome to those who were living in so un-Christlike an environment. To redeemed men Christ is everything. And for them to feel that they were not only admitted to share in His salvation, but to have sympathy with His will, and to enter into so close a fellowship with Him that they could be called His bride, would be supremely blissful.

III. *The perfect life is marked by the absence of some things that are much in evidence here.* "There is no night there." All that night can stand for is absent. There is no clouding of the mind, no uncertainty of moral vision, no mists clinging about the soul and shutting it in from the view of spiritual truth. There is no sorrow, nor crying, nor pain, nor death. We recognise that these things are not without their uses here. The hearts of men might become very hard and callous were it not that they are being continually smitten to tenderness by pain and sorrow and death. "There are worse things on earth than tears." But the value of these things is only a relative one. It depends on

their being the antidote to that which would wither the emotions of the heart, sin and its curse. The gentle dews of sorrow soften the soil that would become hard and enchain the tender affections, and liberate them from their prison. Pain disciplines the life from which the world might push out all remembrance of God. It is a mark of the love of the Heavenly Father that even the bitter fruits of sin should have such healing virtue. But, after all, they have their roots in sin. And when the possibility of forgetfulness of and disobedience to God is taken away, the means of discipline is also laid aside. "The child grown man, you burn the rod." And pain and sorrow and death can have no place where sin with its blighting curse does not come.

But other things, to which this life owes much of its grandeur and solemn peace, are absent from the perfect life. "I saw no temple therein." "The city had no need of the sun nor of the moon to lighten it." The symbol has been outgrown because the reality has come. Here, where the material world so persistently presses in upon the mind through the gateways of the senses, we need the temple with its ministry and its appointed services, its message and its Sacraments, to

lead out memory and thought and faith into the unseen. Here, where our journey lies through darkness or dim twilight, over a road beset with difficulties and dangers and enemies, we prize those lesser lights from the fountain of all light,—the Bible, which is a light to our feet and a lamp to our path, the history of the world, which lifts its guiding and warning beacons to our view, conscience, the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. But there, in the dwelling-place of the presence and the light of God, the vision of His face shall never be clouded, nor shall the feet stumble in their steady, unwearying progress. "The Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb is the temple thereof." "The glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the lamp thereof."

IV. Lastly, *the picture contains some positive aspects of the perfect life.* And here we see the writer struggling with language and imagery too poor to express the glowing features of his vision. Over and over again the thought breaks through the expression, so that we have the picture of a city that our power of conception refuses to grasp. We need not fear to put too much significance into the imagery, for the loftiest imagery is all too inadequate to set forth the perfect life.

Does the seer wish to suggest the security of that life? Then he speaks of the walls of the city with their foundations, with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb inscribed upon them. Does he wish to suggest the universal diffusion of the life? Then he tells how the walls are pierced by twelve gates, looking north and south and east and west, and standing invitingly open for all to enter. Does he wish to bring before us the wealth and glory of the life? Then he describes the wall as of jasper, and its foundations of precious stones, its gates of pearl, and its streets, even what is put to the homeliest uses, as of pure gold. Does he wish to convey that the life is complete in every direction, not over-developed on one side and stunted in another, as is the case with so much of life here? Then he tells us that the city is a perfect cube: "The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal." The perfect life gathers up into itself all that is most worthy and permanent in the earthly life. "The kings of the earth,"—all those that have been supreme in thought, in imagination, in feeling, in spiritual power, in practical capacity—the aristocrats of history, "do bring their glory into it." Not an honourable and

worthy deed done on earth, not a struggle for righteousness and truth, not a throb of sympathy in which heart has communed with heart, fails to find a place in it. "They bring the glory and the honour of the nations into it." The dazzle of earthly power does not cast its glamour over the citizens of the Holy City, but love is acknowledged as supreme and sovereign: "The throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it." The failings that characterise the best service of God's servants here, physical weakness, mental narrowness, moral failure, spiritual imperfection, shall not frustrate or mar the service of the perfect life: "His servants shall serve Him." The deepest longings of the souls of God's saints of all ages shall no longer be disappointed of their satisfaction: "They shall see His face." And best of all, and most wonderful of all, there shall settle upon them, not a momentary, but an abiding likeness to the King: "His name shall be upon their foreheads." Such is the closing vision which John gives to the Christians of his time. "The hearing of this is enough to ravish one's heart," said Pliable, as Christian read to him of the glories of the Celestial City. And would it not have ravished the hearts of these persecuted Christians, as John wrote underneath

the glowing picture, "He that overcometh shall inherit these things"?

But this vision is future only in the sense that its perfect manifestation can come after the victory of God has been gained in the history of mankind. It is present in the sense that it is coming to realisation now. Even in the vision itself, the seer breaks through the conception of it as lying in the future. "I will give to him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely;" but only on earth can we find such thirsty souls. "The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations;" but only on earth do we find nations in need of healing. The perfect life is to come; but it also has come. It is present with us. If one of the Christians that fell asleep under Domitian were to arise from the dead, and see how the persecuted Church has conquered, would it not seem to him that the new earth had come down out of heaven from God? We look abroad upon many and great evils; but we see also the spirit and will of God more and more taking a hold of human society. Life now is opening out into the life that shall be. There is a causal connection between faithfulness and the inheritance, because faithfulness is ever bringing the perfect life nearer. Individually we can do

little; but every little that we do contributes to the great result. "Think of the men who built the Pyramids," said Dr. E. J. Palmer in an address to Oxford undergraduates. "Think of their dragging those gigantic blocks across the desert. Think of the thousands who toiled at them. Men came and dragged and dragged and died; and others came and dragged and dragged and died; and yet others dragged and dragged and died. And at last the Pyramids were raised. So in the work of Christ we take our turns, we labour and die. But we are not raising some foolish pyramid. We are building the City of God."

But in order that we may help in this progressive realisation of the perfect life, the ideal must be ever present to us by faith. The vision of the City of God furnishes the strongest stimulus to fight against the power of evil. God gives us the vision that our hearts may be filled with longing for it, that we may be drawn towards it. He sets before us an ideal, which no efforts of ours will ever bring in its completeness, which no progress that we can make will enable us to reach, and yet which may be the inspiration of every step that we take. When the traveller, weary and footsore, sees from some elevated part of the road the distant spires and towers

of the city that he desires to reach, a miraculous energy seems to come into his tired limbs, and his step unconsciously quickens as he braces himself anew to his journey. So God has given us this vision of the end of all things, that the power of it may enter into our souls, that the glory of it may ravish our hearts, that the worth of it may brace our energies. He throws the splendid picture on the canvas, and, pointing to it, He says, "He that overcometh shall inherit these things." This is the life that opens out before him that is faithful to God in the life that now is. This is the victory that awaits him. What more striking message could we have at the opening of another year?[1] The past may have been full of failure and sin. But God is giving us this new beginning. Again He spreads before us the glory of the life that is laid up for His faithful servants. Again He points to it and says, "He that overcometh shall inherit these things." What is to be the answer of our life in the coming year? What is to be our position in the present conflict? Let us ponder the vision and each make answer for himself.

[1] Preached on 2nd January 1910.

XVII

"THE TIME IS AT HAND"

"And behold, I come quickly. Blessed is he that keepeth the words of the prophecy of this book."—REV. xxii. 7.

WE have now completed our study of the vision that John saw in Patmos, and which he wrote in a book and sent to the churches in Asia for the strengthening of their faith. It is a great symbolic picture setting forth the ways of God to man, as exemplified in one particular crisis of the world's history. But while the writer had one particular set of circumstances in view, while he was writing of his own time, and to the Christians of his own day, yet, in so far as the principles of his thought are true, they are applicable to the present time and to all time. So far can we explain the movements of our own age by his teaching. So far can we derive strength and comfort and courage in view of the conditions of to-day. The first century did not exhaust the truth of these historic

principles. If they were true then, they are true for ever. If the first Christians could fortify themselves by those teachings, then so can we. We have tried to look at the picture, or rather the panorama, that has passed before us in the successive chapters of the Revelation. We shall occupy the last of our course of lectures in considering one or two things in the setting or frame that are needed to complete our study. The setting is found both in the first chapter and the last, or, as we may call them, the prologue and the epilogue.

I. *Let us consider, then, the authority of the vision.* For the first question that will be asked about it as a whole is, "What authority has it for us? Does it represent truth and reality, or is it the baseless fabric of a vision, born of a heated enthusiasm? Does it rest on a solid foundation, or is it a devout imagination on which we cannot lean our weight?" This is an important question. For surely there is no more pathetic thing than that mankind should live its life on an unreality. Better to know the truth, be it ever so hard and bare, than to commit our faith to the many-coloured, delusive vapours of fancy. What has the author, then, to say in substantiation of the truth of his vision?

Now, both the prologue and the epilogue have much to say about that. The very first words of the Book tell us that it is "the Revelation of Jesus Christ" given to Him by God to shew unto His servants, and ministered to John by an angel. And in the last chapter, the writer, as if sensible of the wonderfulness of what he has written, sensible of how hard it would be for men, situated as his readers were, to believe it, adds strong and solemn confirmation of its truth. "And the angel said unto me, These words are faithful and true: and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to shew unto His servants the things that must shortly come to pass." With the same purpose he tells the effect that the vision had upon himself. So overpowered was he that he fell down to worship at the feet of the angel which shewed him these things. And he still further authenticates it by the words, "I, Jesus, have sent Mine angel to testify unto you these things for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright, the morning star." Now, you will see by these quotations that the writer claims for himself the standing-ground of the old prophets. He has received his message from God, just as they had. The old prophet

had said, "Thus saith the Lord"; and this New Testament prophet boldly asserts that he also has received his vision direct from God. It was not the product of his own imagination. It came to him. It had all the impression for him of something communicated by another, and that other Christ. It was laid on him as a burden to declare: "Seal not the words of the prophecy of this book." It was given for the churches. And further, it was not a message that men could not respond to, that would not appeal to them, and that they must accept blindfold. Just as the prophets of old came to the people with the words, "Thus saith the Lord," assured that the consciences of their hearers would echo, "Truly by this man hath the Lord spoken;" so does this New Testament prophet come with the revelation from Jesus Christ, sure that the faith of his readers will testify that the message is of Christ. The witness of the Spirit within them would bear testimony to its truth.

Into the authority that the prophet has over the human mind, and his place in the education of the human conscience, I do not think that it is necessary to enter in addressing a Christian congregation. It is sufficient to say that this wondrous vision of spiritual forces

and movements is in line with Old Testament prophecy, in that it summons men to faith in the unseen God in face of a great temptation to apostacy. It was a trumpet-call to endure, as seeing Him who is invisible. It summoned the Christians to see in the movements of their time the traces of Jesus, and to catch in the confused noises of events the echo of His footsteps. The times were dark; but in and through their events, the watching servants were to recognise and acknowledge the coming of the Son of Man. "Behold, He cometh with the clouds." Christ is the pledge that God will do all that He has promised. For those who believe, Christ is the earnest of the loftiest hopes. "I am the bright, the morning star." Where Christ is, it is always morning, giving promise of a fuller and ever fuller day. Our utmost imaginings set a limit far on the hither side of what it is in God's power and will to bestow. Christ is the Guarantee. "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not also with Him freely give us all things!"

This is one of the outstanding messages of the Book, that faith cannot rise too high in its expectation of what God will do for His people. Nothing can be too good to be true.

If there is no limit to our faith, there is no limit to God's giving. "All things are possible to him that believeth." Is not this a message that we need to-day amid the conflicting voices of the hour? There is a living God behind all. There is a Divine Saviour behind all. He can take our poorest efforts and make them fruitful. He can take our misunderstandings and errors and make them conducive to the bringing forth of truth. He can take our blunders and our failures and make them redound to His glory and the coming of His Kingdom, if only we have faith in Him, and submit to His will. The one thing that He can do nothing with, that foils and frustrates Him, is lack of faith. "He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief."

Here, then, we have the message of a prophet, inspired by God, in what way it is not of importance to enquire. And it is a message that appeals to our faith. As Christian men, believing in God and in Jesus Christ, His Son, we must believe that all the movements of history are bringing a new order of things, which more and more is worthy to be called the Kingdom of God, the Holy City, New Jerusalem, that descends from God out of heaven.

II. We come now to the second point to which we would call attention, *the nearness of the fulfilment of the prophecy.* This point has been a stumbling-block to many, and yet it is perhaps the outstanding point in the prologue and the epilogue. The first verse of the Book strikes this note: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to shew unto His servants, even the things which must shortly come to pass." And this note is repeated again and again: "The time is at hand." "The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to shew unto His servants the things that must shortly come to pass." "And behold, I come quickly." "Seal not up the words of the prophecy of this book; for the time is at hand. He that is unrighteous, let him do unrighteousness still: he that is filthy, let him be made filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him do righteousness still: and he that is holy, let him be made holy still." As if the writer would say that the crisis, the coming of Christ, is so imminent that there was no time for change: "Behold, I come quickly."

Now, as we have said, this has been a great stumbling-block to many. Here is John speaking of the coming of Christ as imminent, and yet nearly two thousand years

have passed and, to all appearance, He has not come. We may even say that the Church has ceased to look for His coming. And if the expectation of John on this, the point that can be brought to the test of history, was unfounded, what must we say about the other matters that we cannot so test? And many interpreters have been forced to have recourse to the explanation that it is God's "quickly" that the writer means, and that with Him a thousand years are as one day.

Now, I think that no interpretation of the words is satisfactory that does not take them as the first readers of the Book would take them, in their simple, natural meaning. How would these Christians understand the words? When John said, "The time is at hand," would they take him to mean that it was at least two thousand years off? Would it not have been positively cruel to encourage them with the hope that the consummation of all things was at hand, when the writer knew that it was a long way off? We must acquit John of any such playing with words. Whether he was mistaken or not, we cannot honestly doubt that he meant his readers to understand his words in their most literal and obvious sense. John did himself expect, and

meant to lead them to expect the near approach of Christ.

But has history justified his expectation? Apparently it has not. The world has not seen the Son of Man return in bodily form to this earth. The firmament that closed over Him when He went away has not parted to His returning. Oftentimes has His return been expected, but it has never come. So that scoffers can ask the question, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were." Was John in error, then, in his expectation?

A favourite way of answering this question at the present day is, that the whole of the Early Church, apostles and all, were in error; that, taking some words of Christ in their literal instead of in their spiritual sense, they expected what was not destined to take place. Now, I think that an exaggerated stress is laid upon the expectation of the apostles of the near return of Jesus in bodily form. But be this as it may, taking into account the character of this Book, I do not find in it a single statement that warrants the expectation of a bodily return at all. On the other hand, as we have seen, John's faith in the near coming of Christ is as plain as words can make it. And if John

was right, then the coming of Christ to which he was referring must be long since past.

Now, it is just this theory that we have been working out in our exposition of this Book. The Christians to whom John was writing were face to face with a crisis that brought to an end one age of the world's history and ushered in a new era. The struggle that was going on between the Church and the world was of transcendent importance. Few will deny that the whole future of the world depended on the issue of that struggle. Few will be bold enough to say that it did not matter much whether the Empire or the Church triumphed; whether the worship of Cæsar or of Christ became dominant; whether the moral ideals of paganism held the field, or those of Christianity gained a foothold. Few will assert that the victory of the Christian religion did not bring to the world infinite blessing. It was a momentous age. The old and the new were met together in deadly conflict. Brute force was trying to crush the suasion of love. The deceits of heathenism were trying to quench the light of truth. It was an age of tremendous meaning and importance. It has profoundly influenced every age since. It will continue to influence all future ages to the end of time. It was the

age that gave to the world the Christ and the Christian gospels and the Christian ideals. It was the age in which Christianity took a firm hold of the world. And can we not truly say of such a time, that in it Christ came, that He went forth, conquering and to conquer? He came in the triumph of His gospel, and in the power of His Cross, and in the influence of His teaching. There can never again in the world's history be an age like it, when the eternal truth was like a flickering light which a breath of wind might extinguish, but which yet shone brighter and stronger till it became like the sun shining in its strength. Yes, Christ came into the world in the triumph of His gospel. Christ reigned in the glory of His Cross. And all who endured the cross, all who followed Him in shame and persecution, reigned with Him. What Christ stood for triumphed. His revelation triumphed. His Church triumphed. His Cross triumphed. Was not that a coming of Christ into the world? All the power of the world was not able to extinguish the Divine truth. Christianity was triumphing in history; and, as it turned out, that triumph was complete.

It is this triumph of Christ's cause of which John prophesied throughout this Book. It was his power to see it that constituted him

a prophet of God. One of the strangest things about that strange age was that though Rome had subtle historians, she had no prophets. She had none able to discern the signs of the times. Not one of them gave more than a passing and contemptuous reference to Christianity. Neither Tacitus, nor Suetonius, nor Pliny, famous names all of them, was able to see the importance of this new faith that had sprung up in their midst, and was threatening the old Roman religion. But the Christian apostles could discern the signs of the times, and faith enabled them calmly to await the victory of Christ's cause. It was an age that was worthy of an epic. And here it is. The Book of Revelation is the epic of Christianity.

And though there can never again be an age in the world's history so great in moment as the first century, never a time when the beginning of a new era is so clearly marked, every age in which Christianity takes a step forward, in which Christian truth goes into a deeper stratum of human thinking, in which Christian principle lays its hand with a surer grip upon human life, is an age in which Christ still comes. Christ is always coming. He comes in the triumph of every right cause, in the progress of every Christian movement,

in the deepening and purifying of every human interest, in the progressive education and refinement of the common conscience of the race. He comes when a wave of moral enthusiasm sweeps across the world; when a new idea of freedom, brotherhood, consecration, service, takes possession of the minds of men; when the Kingdom of God, His righteous and beneficent rule, is extended or deepened among men. Christ comes when a nation is born into the Kingdom, when some higher ideal of life breaks upon the slumbering conscience of a people and awakens it, when some struggle between right and wrong is settled once and for all. Then does Christ come. And the prophet into whose ear God whispers, who sees the coming afar off, can help by his faith. The command comes to him, "Seal not up the words of the prophecy, for the time is at hand." It is not meant for a far distant future, but for the encouragement of God's weary soldiers and watchers of to-day. Tell them that God is not indifferent to their sufferings and conflict. He is coming, and coming soon, to give them the victory, and to reward every man according to his works.

And the epilogue sets forth also the worthy attitude of the Church to this promise. It is

as if John would put into the Church's mouth the appropriate answer. The Spirit says, Come. The bride says, Come. He that hears is invited to say, Come. "Even so come, Lord Jesus," is the fervent prayer with which the Book ends. Surely this is the appropriate attitude for the Church in every age to hold! Even though He come with the clouds of loss and disaster, even though His coming should mean the shaking of all that we have deemed most stable, it is still better for the world that He should come. As the rising sun turns the clouds into fiery chariots, so the clouds of life and history come to wear a signal, solemn beauty and grandeur, when we realise that Christ is coming with them, that they are the chariots that bring Him. "Blessed is he that keepeth the words of the prophecy of this book." Faith, expectation, loyalty, bring the day.

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